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Orientalism in American Cinema: Providing an Historical and Geographical Context for Post-Colonial Theory

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ORIENTALISM IN AMERICAN CINEMA: PROVIDING AN HISTORICAL AND
GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT FOR POST-COLONIAL THEORY

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
History

by
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Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

Of the many criticisms leveled at Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism* (1978), and those of post-colonial theorists following in his wake, from an historian's perspective the most significant is that his argument is utterly lacking in historical context. In fact, post-colonial theorists do tend to mistrust the validity of history and often are suspicious of its complicity in the enterprise of western empires. Despite Said's undeniable ahistoricism, however, most historians agree that the basic tenants of his argument have merit. What is lacking, then, is an examination of orientalism not as an indictment, with all manner of evidence pulled seemingly at random from a jumble of historic periods and geographic locations, but as an historical trend, a bi-product – and often abettor – of empire-building, artistic [mis]representation and othering of the unknown, which manifests itself in a variety of ways in different periods and settings. Analyzing the nature of orientalism in a specific western form of representation set against the historical context with regard to a certain geographic location, and how it evolves in form as the historical/political backdrop advances, will ground the endeavor of post-colonial theory firmly within the framework of historical inquiry. This will test the validity of Said's thesis when the issues of his historicism and his references to portrayals of various and incongruous locales are corrected. I attempt to do this here by examining orientalism in American films set in Iraq, Egypt and Jerusalem, from the silent era to the present day, and tracing the unique form it takes and the evolution it undergoes as a result of American political/military interaction with and cultural awareness of each of these locations, respectively.

DEDICATION

For Caitlin and Matt, and in loving memory of Jennifer Scurry.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When Edward Said launched his indictment of the field of Oriental Studies in his seminal book, *Orientalism* (1978), he was an outsider attacking the establishment. With a background in literary studies, he ventured into the territory of historians, geographers, Arabists, and academics from other disciplines who studied the Orient. He singled out well-known Orientalists such as Bernard Lewis and charged them and the entire field of Orientalism with being complicit in a power/knowledge structure in which they simultaneously provided useful knowledge about the Orient for its western colonizers and created an imagined version of it justifying that colonization.

Three decades later, the landscape of Middle Eastern Studies is entirely changed. The majority of historians of the Middle East agree with at least some of Said's thesis, but there remain a number of criticisms of *Orientalism*. From an historian's perspective, most important among them is the fact that the examples Said draws on to assemble his argument are lacking in historical and geographical context. Conservative historians who dislike Said's pro-Palestinian politics have grumbled loudly about this, but scholars on the left have noted it as well. If an historian were to examine orientalism in a single medium – be it historical writing, travel literature or painting – with regard to a specific location in the “Orient” and within a particular historical context, would Said's argument remain convincing? Would this reveal flaws in his thesis, or would it perhaps strengthen it? In this thesis, I attempt to answer these questions by examining orientalism in

American films set in three locations in the Middle East – Baghdad, Jerusalem and Egypt – and following the evolution of its manifestations from the 1910s to the present day.

Of the various forms of western representation of the East that could be examined, that which arguably captures the perception of the largest portion of Americans and most clearly reflects shifts in these illustrations is film. Big-budget, Hollywood films reflect their audience's views and preconceptions to a striking degree because they are designed to do so. Filmmakers and studios aim for the largest market possible and attempt to show their viewers what they expect to see. They also inadvertently imbue films with elements of the cultural, political and historical environment in which they are made, aspects of which are often hidden until years later. Thus, examining Hollywood films set in Baghdad, Jerusalem and Egypt will provide evidence of a specific kind of American representation of the Middle East, and how it has changed with regard to different places over the last century.

Before testing Said's thesis, it is necessary to contextualize this endeavor with a brief examination of the extensive debate over *Orientalism*. After a survey of the relevant scholarship in the remainder of chapter one, chapter two will track the evolution of orientalism in films set in Baghdad. While the early films are rampant with fantastical orientalist tropes, the American entanglement in the region, beginning with the First Gulf War and increasing exponentially with the Iraq Invasion in 2003, brought about an entirely different mode of representing Baghdad and its inhabitants.

Chapter three will examine films set in Jerusalem that focus on the life of Jesus. These films reveal a considerably more complicated dynamic, as American connections

to Christian mythology and regional politics break down certain aspects of orientalism and exacerbate others. American films about Egypt are the focus of chapter four; they display a deeply-rooted form of orientalism – albeit one with several positive characteristics – that actually increases over the course of the last century, arguably leaving us with a more orientalist image of Egypt at present than ever before.

I: ORIENTALISM – THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DEBATE

Among the virtually unquantifiable waves and ripples still rolling through academia as a result of Said's *Orientalism* colliding with the old guard of Orientalists is the difficulty that the word itself has lost its definite meaning. Thus it is necessary to deal with the issue of semantics before attempting to explicate Said's argument. Robert Irwin has outlined multiple historical meanings of Orientalism, among them an eighteenth-century French usage to denote someone "preoccupied with Levantine matters"; a late eighteenth-century British style associated with the fashion for *chinoiserie*; and an early nineteenth-century application to someone studying "any and all Asian languages and cultures." In the 1830s, it was also used to refer to certain administrators and scholars in British India in favor of the study and teaching of Indian culture, thereafter becoming a more general term used to refer to someone who studies Asian and North African languages and cultures.¹ Bernard Lewis refers to this latter usage – an academic discipline dealing with the "Orient" – as one of two main pre-Said meanings of Orientalism, the other being a French school of painting concerned with representations

¹ Robert Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and its Discontents*. Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press (2006) pp. 5-6.

of the Orient.² In this thesis I use the term “orientalism” in three different ways: “Orientalism” refers to the academic discipline of those who study the “Orient;” italicized *Orientalism* refers to Said’s book; and lower-case “orientalism” denotes Said’s conception of “the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient,”³ or more clearly, the alleged “Orientalizing” of the Orient and Orientals on the part of Orientalists as a component of a hegemonic power/knowledge structure. This latter usage is complicated, and its applicability varies greatly, as will be examined in greater detail below.

Orientalism is undeniably a powerful polemic, regardless of whether one welcomes it with open arms or rejects its theoretical claims. Since it was first published in 1978, it has sparked as much heated debate among academics as any work in recent decades, and there is no clear line in the sand separating supporters from naysayers. The bulk of those who have weighed in can be divided into three categories: some flatly dismiss Said’s thesis; others are in general disagreement with Said but are willing to concede some points; still others are in general agreement with most of Said’s argument but are critical of some key flaws in his work. Unquestioning devotees are few and far between. There is an important partition, moreover, between the first two decades of debate and the subsequent post-2000 (and post-9/11, a date of considerable importance) considerations of *Orientalism*. The earlier debate involved heated arguments over the validity and implications of the work – including numerous exchanges in print and person between Said and Bernard Lewis – as well as various forms of *ad hominem* attack on

² Alexander Lyon Macfie, Preface, Introduction, editor *Orientalism: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000. Bernard Lewis, “The Question of Orientalism,” *New York Review of Books* 29, 1982, 49-56; University Press (2000) p. 251.

³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage (1979) p. 2-3.

Said himself. Later pundits inevitably reflected knowledge of the immense preceding corpus of debate, but also their contemporary surroundings, in which the West is more conspicuously entangled in the “Orient.”

II: SAID’S THESIS

Edward Said was not the first to level attacks on the Orientalists. Others had done so before him, most notably Anouar Abdel-Malek, A. L. Tibawi and Bryan S. Turner,⁴ charging them with stereotyping and misrepresenting Orientals, but without approaching his fervor and impact. For Said, “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.”⁵ The Orient as “other” helped to define the Occident “as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.”⁶ The essence of Said’s argument is that “Orientalism is – and does not simply represent – a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world.”⁷ The Orient was therefore created, imagined, and this Western idea of “the Orient” permeated all thinking and writing about and otherwise representing the Orient because any Westerner “comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second.”⁸

The crux of Said’s argument is that this manufactured Orient was both a result of and a contributor to western power over the Orient and Orientals: “To believe that the

4 Alexander Lyon Macfie, *Orientalism: A Reader* p. 3.

5 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*. p. 1.

6 Ibid 1-2.

7 Ibid 12.

8 Ibid 11.

Orient was created . . . and to believe that such things happen simply as a necessity of the imagination, is to be disingenuous. The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony.”⁹ Said employs Foucault’s idea of discourse and Gramsci’s notion of “hegemony” as a foundation for his description of orientalism as an Occidental discourse, a power/knowledge structure wielding authority over the dominated Orient. He writes that one must examine orientalism as a discourse in order to “understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period.”¹⁰ His intention is not to suggest that orientalism is “some nefarious ‘Western’ imperialist plot to hold down the ‘Oriental’ world.” He argues instead that it is:

a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; it is an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of “interests” which [. . .] it not only creates but also maintains; it *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different world . . .”¹¹

Thus orientalism is a discourse produced by and in exchange with several manifestations of power – political, intellectual, cultural, moral – and which is fundamentally inescapable. In short, the power of orientalism lies in its inherent pervasiveness.

Having begun by presuming that “the Orient is not an inert fact of nature,” Said already was in territory that would make several of his critics irate:

9 Ibid 5.
10 Ibid 3.
11 Ibid 12.

It is not merely *there*, just as the Occident itself is not just *there* either. We must take seriously Vico's great observation that men make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to geography: as both geographical and cultural entities . . . such locales, regions, geographical sectors as 'Orient' and 'Occident' are man-made.¹²

Said, however, stops far short of the Derrida-ian extreme of post-modernist thought, the notion that the Orient actually exists only as representation. In his introduction, he emphatically states that there was and is a real Orient: "There were – and are – cultures and nations whose location is in the East, and their lives, histories, and customs have a brute reality obviously greater than anything that could be said about them in the West."¹³ He further asserts, however, that his primary concern is to deal with the Occidental discourse on the Orient, not any manner of correspondence with a "real" Orient.¹⁴ He insists that orientalism is not accidental, but part of a power structure – one cannot take the first half of the argument and discount the configuration in which it exists – and that it is *not* merely a "structure of lies or of myths which, were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away." The system of power/knowledge within which *orientalism* exists, and by which it was created, formed it as a powerful, durable structure.¹⁵

One final point is necessary before moving on to consider Said's critics: the distinction he draws between latent and manifest orientalism. This differentiation is essentially between unconscious (latent) orientalist thinking and tangible (manifest) "stated views about Oriental society, language, literature, history, sociology, and so

12 Ibid 4-5.

13 Ibid 5.

14 Ibid 5.

15 Ibid 5-6.

forth.”¹⁶ The clearest summation of the difference between the two in practice is that “whatever change occurs in knowledge of the Orient is focused almost exclusively in manifest Orientalism; the unanimity, stability, and durability of latent Orientalism are more or less constant.”¹⁷

One example, from the abundance Said supplies, is warranted to illustrate his argument. Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) wrote of numerous encounters with Oriental women, perhaps the most revealing of which was his experience with Kuchuk Hanem, an Egyptian courtesan who danced for him and with whom he subsequently slept. Said writes that “he was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was ‘typically’ Oriental.”¹⁸ Through such encounters and depictions a paradigm was created and supported representing the Oriental, and Occidental, in a particular way, repeatedly confirming its own assumptions. Flaubert associated the Orient with an easily possessable sexuality and represented his conquest as promiscuous and unintelligent, thereby highlighting his own superior intellect.¹⁹ Flaubert’s written account is an example of manifest orientalism, whereas his subconscious perception of the Orient, and that which his writing creates in his readers’ subconscious, is latent orientalism. The concrete examples of visible, overt orientalism evident in film are also manifest, but likewise, they provide evidence of latent orientalist

16 Ibid 206.

17 Ibid 206.

18 Ibid 6.

19 Ibid 186-89.

thinking on the part of filmmakers, thinking that is potentially planted in the subconscious of viewers.

III: SAID'S CRITICS

One of the reasons the debate over orientalism has been so divisive is that it builds on fundamental theoretical and political differences within the academic community. When all is said and done, those who agree with the general thesis of *Orientalism* tend also to agree on the importance of postmodernism. It is not surprising, then, that quarrelling over the validity of postmodernism and the ahistorical aspects of *Orientalism* has dominated much of the debate. Furthermore, Said was politically outspoken, particularly concerning his Palestinian nationalism, and directly attacked Orientalists such as Bernard Lewis for their political views. In return, this prompted extensive personal/political attacks against Said on the part of many of his critics, and politics and theoretical leanings have largely defined the debate ever since.

Not surprisingly then, given his political conservatism and scholarly empiricism, Lewis has been one of Said's harshest critics. He complains that the term "Orientalism" itself "was poisoned by the kind of intellectual pollution that in our time has made previously useful words unfit for use in rational discourse."²⁰ In response to a passage in which Said explains why British, French and American writing on the Orient is more important than their German counterpart, Lewis writes, "The whole passage is not merely false but absurd. It reveals a disquieting lack of knowledge of what scholars

²⁰ Bernard Lewis, "The Question of Orientalism," *New York Review of Books* 29, 1982, 49-56; Alexander Lyon Macfie, *Orientalism: A Reader* p. 251.

do and what scholarship is about.”²¹ Indeed, Said’s neglect of German Orientalists is one of the more common criticisms, and one without an apparent answer, other than that German scholarship, and Germany’s lack of colonies, does not fit Said’s power/knowledge structure or conception of hegemony as a productive force in a discourse. In terms of sheer imbalance, Lewis argues that “at no time before or after the imperial age did their [Britain and France] contributions, in range, depth, or standard, match the achievement of the great centers of Oriental studies in Germany.”²² He also speculates that Said’s neglect of the Russian Orientalists, who represented the Orient far more harshly, indicates his simple lack of knowledge about them, as they would presumably have supported his thesis.²³

In contrast to Lewis, Homi Bhabha agrees with the overall thrust of Said’s thesis but has reservations concerning his intermingling of different theorists. Despite his sometimes convoluted prose, Bhabha’s position is simple enough. He is in general agreement with Said as concerns the nature of Occidental “othering” of the Oriental, but takes issue with his use of the concept of discourse concurrent with a hegemonic power/knowledge structure.²⁴ He writes that:

having introduced the concept of ‘discourse’ [Said] does not face up to the problems it creates for an instrumentalist notion of power/knowledge that he seems to require. [...] It is not possible to see how power functions productively as incitement and interdiction. Nor would it be possible, without the attribution of ambivalence to relations of power/knowledge, to calculate the traumatic impact of the return of the oppressed – those terrifying stereotypes of savagery, cannibalism, lust and anarchy which are the signal points of identification and

21 Bernard Lewis, “The Question of Orientalism,” *New York Review of Books*, pp. 49-56; Alexander Lyon Macfie, *Orientalism: A Reader* p. 258.

22 Ibid 258.

23 Ibid 263.

24 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge (1994) p. 103.

alienation, scenes of fear and desire, in colonial texts. It is precisely this function of the stereotype as phobia and fetish that . . . threatens the closure of the racial/epidermal schemes for the colonial subject and opens the royal road to colonial fantasy.²⁵

Even for those of us who do not speak fluent Bhabha, the implication here is plain enough. He is unable to reconcile Said's simultaneous use of Foucault and Gramsci and follows this contradiction to the conclusion that latent and manifest orientalism cannot exist as functions of productive power realized as orientalist stereotype, but rather argues that Western stereotypes of the East are the result of phobia and fetish, only finding a place as *part* of the discourse. Weighty though they may seem, however, these issues only reorient rather than fundamentally challenge Said's thesis.

Albert Hourani, an Orientalist of the old establishment who had criticized its "orientalism" before Said, similarly concedes several of Said's arguments, takes issue with a few, and gives the impression of being in agreement with his general view. He writes, "Mr. Said is right to say that 'orientalism' is a typically 'occidental' mode of thought, but perhaps he makes the matter too simple when he implies that this style of thought is inextricably bound up with the fact of domination, and indeed is derived from it."²⁶ Not convinced that power played an exclusive role in shaping Orientalist representations of the East, Hourani nevertheless sees value in Said's work, despite its polemic nature. "There are a strength and force in Mr. Said's methods of expression which at times bring him near caricature," Hourani concludes, "but what he says is not to be ignored. It can help those who profess 'oriental studies' to understand better what they

²⁵ Ibid 103-4.

²⁶ Albert Hourani, *Islam in European Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1991) p. 63.

are doing.”²⁷ This balanced view on the part of Hourani, Bhabha, and others would become an important part of the debate over the theory of orientalism, serving as ammunition for both sides, depending on which lines future writers chose to employ.

In the wake of September 11th, current events were brought into the debate over *Orientalism*. Martin Kramer, an Israeli-American scholar who studied under Bernard Lewis at Princeton, wrote a polemic of his own entitled *Ivory Towers on Sand*²⁸ in which he bitterly attacks the Middle East Studies community in the United States for having been led by Said down a post-modernist road that has rendered it incapable of providing any useful information about the Middle East. The purpose of providing such information, as Kramer sees it, is to supply the government with usable knowledge, something scholars lost in a haze of self-loathing and poststructuralist theory were unable to do. From his perspective, this rendered the field incapable of producing the kind of useful scholarship that could have prevented the September 11th attacks. Kramer argues that the success of *Orientalism*, which he suggests is an almost exclusively American phenomenon, is inseparable from the failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America. In addition, he contends that rather than deserving praise for “brushing convention,” *Orientalism*, written during the rise of the postmodernist takeover, merely “rode the crest of this immensely successful academic uprising.”²⁹ He also complains that *Orientalism*

27 Ibid 63.

28 This book was published in the wake of September 11th but written mostly beforehand.

29 Martin Kramer, *Ivory Towers on Sand: the Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*. Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy (2001) p. 31.

made it acceptable, even expected, for scholars to spell out their own political commitment as a preface to anything they wrote or did.”³⁰

IV: THE AHISTORICISM OF *ORIENTALISM*

Some of the most notable and constructive criticisms of *Orientalism* have come from those scholars who take issue with Said’s failure to provide an historical context for his argument. David Kopf writes, “Though it does probe deeply into the consciousness of the imperialist mentality, *Orientalism* lacks historical precision, comprehensiveness, and subtlety.”³¹ One of the most extensive critiques of Said on this score comes from the British imperial historian John MacKenzie, who writes, “In so far as Said is a historian at all, he is a Whig.” He adds that “it is perhaps this prescriptive Whiggism which has made Said’s work so difficult for historians to handle.”³² MacKenzie complains that Said and his supporters write about subjects within “the matrix of imperialism,”³³ but that because they are not imperial historians they are alarmingly vague. In “Whiggish” fashion, Said reads presentist sentiments into historical writings and imposes a predetermined conclusion on earlier sequences of events. But in MacKenzie’s view, “When Orientalist ideas are fitted into the grand progression of the historian’s periodization, a curious counterpoint establishes itself. Orientalism and imperialism . . . did not march in

30 Ibid 37.

31 David Kopf, “Hermeneutics Versus History,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, pp. 495-506; referenced in Alexander Lyon Macfie, *Orientalism: A Reader* p. 196.

32 John M. MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press (1995) p. 20.

33 Ibid xv.

parallel.”³⁴ He argues that the relationship was vastly more balanced than Said would have us believe.

Robert Irwin’s *Dangerous Knowledge* (2006) also tackles Said’s ahistoricism. He claims that “Said has Muslim armies conquering Turkey before they conquered North Africa. That really does suggest a breathtaking ignorance of Middle Eastern history, as does his belief that Britain and France dominated the eastern Mediterranean from about the end of the seventeenth century.”³⁵ Dane Kennedy, meanwhile, concedes that British imperial history “originally served as an ideological adjunct to empire,”³⁶ but argues that in a post-colonial age it should address issues such as the historical context of orientalism – rather than merely complaining that post-colonial theorists have failed to do so – in order to contribute to the dialogue between the two. By undertaking a study of the dynamics of orientalism in specific historical context, imperial historians would not only contribute to this dialogue, but also answer the question: does Said’s argument hold up when one of its key weaknesses is addressed?

This thesis will attempt to take up Kennedy’s charge. My purpose is to examine the representation of the “Oriental other,” and how that representation changes when American ideas about specific locations in the Middle East change, typically due to political/military interactions.

34 Ibid xv.

35 Ibid 282-3.

36 Dane Kennedy, “Imperial History and Post-Colonial Theory” in *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, p. 345.

CHAPTER II

BAGHDAD IN AMERICAN FILM: FROM FLYING CARPETS TO IEDS

Baghdad was among the earliest “Oriental” cities to serve as the setting for mainstream American films, and it has long since remained a portal into a land of fantasy and – although of a wholly different sort at present – adventure. Early Hollywood feature films set in Baghdad transported viewers to an imaginary past, populated by djinns, genies and magic carpets, which simultaneously confirmed orientalist perceptions of the East and instilled the genre with tropes and stock characters that would influence subsequent perceptions of the region. These fantasies are often corruptions of the famous stories from the *Thousand and One Nights*. This is important both because they alter and in some ways abuse the actual tales, adding or deleting at will and imposing orientalist stereotypes, and because from a western perspective the imaginary Baghdad of the past reinforces the politically passive state of the Baghdad contemporary to these films. The early Baghdad fantasy films were produced between the beginning of the British Mandate in 1920 and the military dictatorship that emerged after the 1958 “revolution.” Later, the 1960s, 70s and 80s saw little representation of the city in Hollywood, but a pseudo-Baghdad serves as the backdrop for Disney’s *Aladdin* in 1992, soon after Iraq had been attacked again. *Aladdin* exploited cultural orientalist perceptions to their fullest extent, but with an added hint of military/political orientalism as well. This latter manifestation of orientalism is more fully apparent in *Live from Baghdad* (2002), but remnants of the earlier fantasy Baghdad in American perceptions of the city also continue to permeate the

film. Post-2003, there has been an explosion of documentary film-making about Iraq, and particularly Baghdad, but very few feature films dealing with the city have been made. Those that do exist, like the documentaries, deal with only two topics: the current war and the last war. The last film I will discuss, *Body of Lies* (2008), is not set in Baghdad, and only a small portion of it is even set in Iraq, but it nevertheless reveals a great deal about the form of orientalist representations influenced by the current state of American political and military engagement in the Middle East.

I: THE *THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS*

The early feature films set in Baghdad borrow much of their form and many of their characters from the *Thousand and One Nights*. Misunderstanding and misrepresenting the *Thousand and One Nights* has a long history in Europe and the United States. The Arabic title of the collection is ألف ليلة و ليلة (Alf Layla wa Layla), literally “Thousand Nights and a Night,” but the first English translation was renamed *The Arabian Nights Entertainments*. Furthermore, this was a translation not of the original Arabic, but of a previous French version by Antoine Galland between 1704 and 1717.³⁷ Galland produced more of an adaptation than a translation, bending the stories at will and adding additional stories from other sources, including those of “Aladdin,” “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” and “The Seven Voyages of Sinbad the Sailor.” It was this

³⁷ In fact, there is not really an “original;” the closest thing to it is a fourteenth-century Syrian text. The stories probably existed in oral form for centuries before they were written down, and they circulated in different versions before being compiled into what was probably the first definitive collection in the late thirteenth century. That original and its initial copies are lost, but two branches of manuscripts evolved from the original versions: one Egyptian and the other Syrian. There are four surviving manuscripts from the Syrian branch, three from the sixteenth century and one from the fourteenth.

re-worked version that was subsequently (and loosely) translated into English and then evolved through various adaptations until over eighty versions existed by the end of the eighteenth century.³⁸

So why was Baghdad so closely associated with the fantasy world of the *Thousand and One Nights*? In part, it may be because it was a recognizable “Arabian” city without the pre-existing associations of a city such as Cairo, which conjures ideas related to ancient Egypt,³⁹ and thus it was available to be “created” or “imagined” anew on screen. Most westerners knew nothing concrete about the city, so it could serve as the setting for fantasy without clashing with any preconceived notions. In this sense, it was as vulnerable to artistic re-creation as a magical realm in popular cinema as it was to being politically/militarily dominated in reality. Its subjection to domination, moreover, tamed the city in western minds, making it even more suitable as a setting for adventure/fantasy tales.

It is important to remember that these films were made for an audience that had no real knowledge of Baghdad and certainly had never been there, allowing the filmmakers to create rather than capture the city. Cindy Wong and Gary McDonogh have examined how portrayals of Philadelphia and Hong Kong in film simultaneously create an image that both references common associations with those cities that residents would have and acts as an advertisement for travel to them. They thus identify the very different

³⁸ Husain Haddawy, *The Arabian Nights* (Based on the fourteenth-century manuscript edited by Muhsin Mahdi). Norton & Company: New York, NY; 2008 (First published 1990) pp. xiv-xxi.

³⁹ This is evident in the various versions of *The Mummy*, which draw on a rich nineteenth-century literary and theatrical tradition, and in films like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

interactions with the cities experienced by residents as compared to outsiders.⁴⁰ The Baghdad portrayed in American cinema, however, is always depicted from an external perspective. It is represented by outsiders, for outsiders, and no thought is given to how residents of Baghdad perceive their city. This is true both of the early fantasy/adventure Baghdad films, and of the more recent war/adventure Baghdad films, which contain references to their predecessors.

II: *THE THIEF OF BAGHDAD*

The opening titles to the 1924 version of *The Thief of Bagdad* are:

DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS
IN
THE THIEF OF BAGDAD
AN ARABIAN NIGHTS FANTASY⁴¹

This is followed by a quote from the Koran and then what purports to be the “INTRODUCTION TO THE ARABIAN NIGHTS.”⁴² In fact, the unspecified quote from the Koran is “Praise be to Allah – the Beneficent King – the Creator of the Universe – Lord of the Three Worlds!” which is quite similar to the first line of the *Nights*: “Praise be to God, the Beneficent King, the Creator of the world and man.”⁴³ The text that follows continues to resemble a portion of the foreword to the *Nights*, in that it explains

40 Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong and Gary W. McDonogh “The Mediated Metropolis: Anthropological Issues in cities and Mass Communication” in *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 103, No. 1 (March, 2001) pp. 96-111.

41 *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924) Douglas Fairbanks Pictures; Directed by Raoul Walsh, Written by Achmed Abdullah and Douglas Fairbanks.

42 Ibid 0:50.

43 Husain Haddawy, *The Arabian Nights* p. 3.

that the reader is to take the following stories as a lesson. In these initial seconds, the film therefore jumbles the Koran and the *Nights* and, in effect, renders them equals.

Not only is Islam not taken seriously in the film, but it is often seen as threatening. The opening credits are followed by a scene set in “a street in Baghdad, dream city of the ancient East,”⁴⁴ which marks Baghdad as a fantasy-land from the outset. This is a city of comic chase scenes, magic ropes and brutal public torture. The thief’s journey takes him through all imaginable “Oriental” locals, as he encounters one frightening, mythical creature after another. He races three princes – he on a flying horse and they on a flying carpet – in a competition for the hand of a princess. The city is also reduced to one pan-Asian blend ethnically, reflecting the western perception of the East as a variegated entity containing numerous but ultimately indistinguishable manifestations of the “other.” The hero and heroine, on the other hand, have western features. To win the hand of the princess, the thief must bring back “the rarest treasure”⁴⁵ from various imagined locals in the “East.” His competitors for the princess are three princes, one of them “Mongol,” who embark on similar journeys. The East thus becomes an indistinguishable jumble of various East Asian, Middle Eastern and African peoples, locations, animals and architecture.

One of the aspects of *The Thief of Baghdad* that is recycled in later films is the implication that the story is being told in modern-day Baghdad, thereby invoking Said’s conception of the “unchanging East.” At the film’s beginning and end there is a brief

⁴⁴ *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924) Douglas Fairbanks Pictures; Directed by Raoul Walsh, Written by Achmed Abdullah and Douglas Fairbanks, 1:20.

⁴⁵ *Ibid* 112:38.

shot of a bearded man in a turban speaking to a small child over a campfire in the manner of a story-teller. This provides a contemporary context for the setting of the tale, but there is no obvious contrast between the ancient and present in dress or location. That the two lack distinction reveals an inherent lack of awareness of Middle Eastern history or progress.

The rudimentary orientalist images in the silent-era 1924 *The Thief* are more fully realized in its 1940 remake.⁴⁶ The ships docking at the city's port are elaborately colored: their sails are bright red and blue, their hulls pale green, turquoise and crimson, their crews adorned in vivid Oriental garb. The villain Jaffar first appears wearing a bright red turban that covers his face, followed by a woman wearing a *niqab*.⁴⁷ The city itself is a brilliant, monotone blue set against towering blue mountains. The film's hero, Ahmed, is first seen as a beggar. In the first half of the film, he tells a roomful of women – presumably in the palace harem – his story. Again, this framing introduction takes us back to a fantasy-land. He speaks of having had “365 wives but no love,” and “fifty palaces, and ... no home,”⁴⁸ typically orientalist tropes of multiple wives and lavish material possessions. These wives and palaces leave him feeling unfulfilled, however, and he will go on to win the heart of one woman and rule as a beneficent king, thus juxtaposing the imagined marital and political practices of the East with those of the

⁴⁶ It should be noted that the 1940 *The Thief of Baghdad* was a production of London Film Productions, but it is largely American in origin, as well, and not only because it is based on the earlier American version. It was filmed in studios in Buckinghamshire and Hollywood, and on location in the US in Arizona and Colorado. Some of the main characters were played by Americans, and it went on to win three Oscars (it was nominated for four). Chances are good, in fact, that many American viewers (if not most) did not realize they were not watching a “Hollywood” picture. Furthermore, discussion of the film is also warranted because of its relation to earlier and later Hollywood images of Baghdad.

⁴⁷ A veil that covers the face except for the area around the eyes. It is the second-most concealing (to the Burka) of all Islamic veils.

⁴⁸ *The Thief of Baghdad* (1940) 11:50.

West, which are represented as morally superior and prove more rewarding for the film's hero.

The contrast between good/white and evil/dark characters is maintained with a strikingly Caucasian princess, surrounded in her decadent garden by maidens as pale and (ostensibly) pure as she. Unveiled and giggling, they provide a contrast to the darker, solemn woman in the black – and therefore sinister – *niqab* who does Jaffar's bidding. The film's other dark-skinned villains, meanwhile, display two images of oriental despotism. The Sultan of Basra is a childish ruler who is unconcerned with his subjects and enthralled by his various toys, while Jaffar, the Sultan of Baghdad, is a corrupt, evil, power-hungry dictator. The Sultan of Basra explains that his toys never fail to obey him, whereas his subjects often "fail to do exactly what [he wants], and [he has] to have their heads cut off."⁴⁹ When Jaffar shows him a magic flying horse, the Sultan must have it and agrees to give Jaffar his daughter in exchange for it.⁵⁰ These, we are left to conclude, are the only types of rulers who exist in the East.

Even in a film that contains so many orientalist stereotypes, the extent to which cruelty and barbarity play a role in *The Thief* is exceptional. There is a public beheading early on, for the crime of "thinking,"⁵¹ carried out with a massive curved sword wielded by a sinister black figure, his face covered. When Ahmed is thrown into Baghdad's miserable dungeon, he learns that he and Abu, a common thief, are to be beheaded at

49 Ibid 37:50.

50 Incidentally, Jaffar describes her as having a "body ... as straight as the letter alif." Ibid 42:30.

51 *The Thief of Baghdad* (1940) 12:55.

dawn. After escaping to Basra they must hide from the princess's approaching caravan because "it's death to look on her" before her father gives her hand in marriage.⁵²

Such callous use of lethal force, represented as the norm in the East, accompanies a comic and condescending treatment of Islam. The blind beggar Ahmed repeats "Alms for the love of Allah" in his first appearance rather than "Alms for the love of *God*," an all-too-common partial translation, and later in the film he and Abu encounter a man in the bazaar in Basra who leaves them with the line, "Allah be with you, but I doubt it."⁵³ This comic play on a courteous salutation embodies an essential aspect of the film's moral sensibility: the viewer does indeed "doubt" that "Allah" will "be with" them because the viewer doubts the existence of "Allah." Retaining the Arabic here is key, because it implies a disavowal of *Islamic* belief in God specifically. Condescension towards Islam is summed up in the use of "Allah" rather than "God," which allows the viewer to distinguish between the Christian and Muslim deity and to believe in the former but not the latter.⁵⁴

The myriad of cultural identifiers representing the unchanging Orient is pervasive in *The Thief*. Even Africa is treated as part of the same geographic realm. The black slave who throws Abu into the dungeon with Ahmed wears a leopard skin around his waist with its legs and tail dangling, his only clothing apart from the olive green turban that also covers his face. Abu speaks of ships on the sea "as fast as antelopes,"⁵⁵ another

52 Ibid 26:30.

53 Ibid 25:30.

54 Allah is not the name of a god, of course, but literally translates as *God* in English. Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews also refer to the God in their versions of monotheism as Allah.

55 Ibid 19:00.

reference to animals associated with sub-Saharan Africa.⁵⁶ The cast of characters Abu encounters later in the film includes a massive genie played by Rex Ingram, an African-American made up to look Asian, with grotesque and exaggerated features. He wears what looks like a *mawashi*, a sumo wrestler's belt, and a *queue*, the traditional Manchu ponytail on an otherwise shaved head. He also has pointed ears and intensely-bushy eyebrows and long, claw-like fingernails. Furthermore, he has a deep, recognizably African-American voice. This mingling of various forms of the "other" sums up the representation of all things non-white/western as equivalent, inferior and exotic.

III: ARABIAN NIGHTS

A 1942 preview for *Arabian Nights* (1942) claims that "FROM THE FASCINATING PAGES OF THE ARABIAN NIGHTS COMES BEAUTY SUCH AS THE SCREEN HAS NEVER SEEN." The narrator refers to "Baghdad, city of temptation!," to "the beauties of the Harem" and "a story rich and exotic as the East itself."⁵⁷ The Baghdad depicted in *Arabian Nights* lacks the supernatural fantasy present in both versions of *The Thief*. Instead, this is a jumbled adaptation of the *Thousand and One Nights*, restructured as an adventure/fantasy. The film opens and ends with a fat and elaborately-dressed harem master lounging with his scantily-clad harem girls. We are left to conclude that this must be present-day Baghdad, as he leads them in reading what is presented as an ancient story from the *Thousand and One Nights*. What follows is

⁵⁶ Incidentally, there was a leopard population in Mesopotamia that was probably hunted to extinction no later than the eighteenth century, but what is important is the association of the leopard with Africa in 1940, in the minds of the viewers and presumably also the filmmakers.

⁵⁷ Preview from *Arabian Nights* (1942) Universal Pictures; Directed by John Rawlins, Written by True Boardman and Michael Hogan

supposed to be the story brought to life, and we only return to the harem at the film's conclusion. *Arabian Nights* thus again uses Baghdad as a setting for an "ancient" tale, but there is no perceivable difference between the old and new versions of the city.

The plot of the story itself, meanwhile, bears no resemblance whatsoever to the *Nights*, but instead borrows its main characters' names from a number of the *Nights* tales. "Shahrazad" is a dancing girl with designs on being the wife of the Caliph, to which end she encourages Kamar al Laman, the Caliph's bastard half-brother, to usurp him. The Caliph, Karoun al Rashid, discovers the plot and orders Kamar to be tortured to death, but Karoun's vizier betrays him and he narrowly escapes assassination. Token elements of familiar tales from the *Nights* appear as comic relief in the film. Karoun takes refuge, under a false identity, with the traveling show in which Shahrazad performs. Also among the troop are Aladdin, a bearded man who repeatedly asks to their collective amusement if anyone has seen his magic lamp, and Sinbad, a former sailor who frequently breaks into story-telling about his seafaring adventures in a comic, Humphrey-Bogart-meets-Jimmy-Cagney accent. These references are to stories that were not even part of the *Thousand and One Nights* prior to Galland's "translation," but they are nevertheless the most recognizable tales to western viewers.

As usual, the main characters have western features, especially the heroic Karoun and his prize, Shahrazad. As in *The Thief of Baghdad*, African animals also appear in the film – leopards and other exotic creatures in the animated opening titles and most

incongruously a zebra that casually stands in the streets of Baghdad early in the film.⁵⁸ Another aspect of the film that references the “Orient” as an indistinguishable whole is the “belly dance” performed by Shahrazad in the final scenes. The various forms of dance from the Middle East, North Africa, Eastern Europe and Central and South Asia that are generally referred to as “belly dancing” in the West have long been regarded as exotic and “forbidden.” The term is in fact a western invention: Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young write that it was “coined by Sol Bloom for the dancers of the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893 for [the] purpose of titillating his audiences.”⁵⁹ In the Middle East, this form of dance has acquired strongly negative connotations due to Islamic beliefs about women being “uncovered” (this means different things in different places) in combination with the highly erotic reputation the dance carries in the West.

Shahrazad performs her exotic belly dance near the film’s end in an attempt to distract Kamar so that she can poison his wine unnoticed. Because the Oriental woman is “sexual, sensual, erotic, and sometimes violent”⁶⁰ in western eyes (and camera lenses), Shahrazad epitomizes western male fantasy without raising the possibility of racially threatening miscegenation: she embodies dangerously alluring traits, but is played by a white, American woman. Ancient Baghdad provides a context in which it is “normal” for a woman to perform her exotic dance, and a situation is created in which western male

58 *Arabian Nights* (1942) Universal Pictures; Directed by John Rawlins, Written by True Boardman and Michael Hogan 16:00.

59 Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young, “Belly Dance: Orientalism—Exoticism—Self-Exoticism” in *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Summer, 2003), p. 16.

60 Diya Abdo, “Uncovering the Harem in the Classroom: Tania Kamal-Eldin’s ‘Covered: The Hejab in Cairo, Egypt’ and ‘Hollywood Harems’ within the Context of a Course on Arab Women Writers” in *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. ½, Looking Across the Lens: Women’s Studies and Film (Spring – Summer, 2002), p. 234.

viewers can watch a western woman step into the erotic role of an eastern woman. Furthermore, she performs her dance when Kamar visits the harem in which she is kept, along with a leopard, for added orientalist effect. The association between this harem and that in which the story is told in modern Baghdad suggests that in both past and present the city is exotic, male-dominated and populated by sexually available and subservient women. Interestingly, the actual Shahrazad of the *Thousand and One Nights* is an educated woman who controls the story and manipulates King Shahrayar. She possesses shrewdness, courage and influence not afforded to the women of *The Thief* or *Arabian Nights*.

IV: ALADDIN

After decades with little representation of Baghdad in American cinema, interest in the region was revived by the First Gulf War, in the wake of which Disney's *Aladdin* appeared in 1992. Little progress had been made, however, in breaking down the orientalist tropes of early American cinema. In fact, *Aladdin* not only confirms the persistence of rampant orientalism in American film, it also provides a glimpse of the evolving – or in some ways unevolving – state of orientalist perceptions of the East, in that a new iconography emerged while the old remained firmly in place. *Aladdin* begins with a tiny, brown, turbaned man with an absurdly large nose riding a camel through the desert and singing a song:⁶¹

Oh I come from a land
From a faraway place

⁶¹ I have included the original here, but later will discuss the slight change in text for the video release.

Where the caravan camels roam
Where they cut off your ear
If they don't like your face
It's barbaric, but hey, it's home
When the winds from the East
And the suns from the West
And the sand and the glass is right
Come on down, stop on by
Hop a carpet and fly
To another Arabian night
Arabian nights, like Arabian days
More often than not
Are hotter than hot
In a lot of good ways
Arabian nights meet Arabian moons
A fool off his guard
Could fall and fall hard
Out here on the dunes

When he dismounts, the little man addresses the viewer directly: “Ahh, Salam and good evening to you.”⁶² This identifies the viewer as a conspicuous visitor in his world, a visitor he welcomes and then attempts to sell something to. The viewer thus encounters him as a tourist. Unable to sell us anything (the view pans, as if we, the audience, are bored and uninterested), he opts to tell us a tale about a lamp he has – available for purchase, of course. Yet again, we are taken back in time to hear an ancient tale, leaving us to conclude that the initial glimpse we get of the city is set in the present-day.⁶³

Aladdin is filled with all manner of stock orientalist characters and themes: veiled but scantily-clad girls, monkeys, sadistic guards toting giant swords, fire-breathers, men walking on coals and flying carpets. The city is depicted as brutal, where “a fool off his guard could fall and fall hard.” The thief from whom the villain Jaffar obtains his trinket

⁶² *Aladdin* (1992) Walt Disney Feature Animation; Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker, Written by Ron Clements and John Musker 1:35.

⁶³ The film purports to take place in Agrabah, a fictitious city based on the Baghdad of earlier fantasy film adaptations of the *Nights*. For that reason, I will treat it as what it essentially is: another fantasy using present-day Baghdad as its jumping-off point for a tale in the ancient city.

in the opening scenes remarks that he “had to slit a few throats”⁶⁴ to get it, and the princess nearly has her hand chopped off for “stealing” a single piece of fruit for hungry children. As in previous films, a variety of cultural signifiers represent the image of the amalgamated Orient. Elephants, lions and tigers all appear, and Jaffar’s sidekick is a parrot. During their musical magic carpet ride Aladdin and the princess fly over pyramids and end up in what appears to be China, complete with fireworks. Furthermore, Alan Nadel points out that virtually all of the characters play dual roles; their identities shift and they casually step in and out of good/evil and meek/powerful personas, representing the uncertainty and unreliability of the East itself.⁶⁵

Nadel, however, is primarily concerned with *Aladdin*’s overt political orientalism. He draws a parallel between the cosmic power of the genie, contained in a tiny lamp and lying in wait among the immense treasure under the sands around the city, and atomic power, “now available in the East as a by-product of the wealth that emanates from the wondrous riches beneath the surface of Arabia.”⁶⁶ This is an aspect of the orientalism in *Aladdin* that could not have been borrowed from a film five decades old; it is absolutely presentist. There are other orientalist elements in *Aladdin*, as well, that are a product of contemporary western ideas about the East. Though the beggar, often blind and mumbling “Alms for the love of Allah,” is a stock character in the earlier films, he is

⁶⁴ Ibid 3:10.

⁶⁵ Alan Nadel, “A Whole New (Disney) World Order: *Aladdin*, Atomic Power, and the Muslim Middle East”; referenced in *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film* edited by Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar. Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, NJ; 1997 pp. 188-89; Nadel writes that “only by harboring the sense that the Muslim Middle East is the site of confused identity, unstable power, and nomadic allegiances could US intelligence, government, media, or popular opinion shift principals and narratives ... with the ease and alacrity of a reader leafing through *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*.” Ibid 191.

⁶⁶ Ibid 192.

typically a lone, elderly man. *Aladdin*, however, reflects an assumption on the part of the filmmakers and the viewers that they are more informed about the East than their predecessors, in that they understand it is a place of dire poverty as well as wealth and luxury. There exist two worlds in the dichotomy *Aladdin* assumes: the wealth located inside the palace walls and the impoverished slums that surround them. The foreboding palace towers over ramshackle neighborhoods that are home to thousands, though only a few people are ever seen. Aladdin's "Whole New World" is that of wealth and luxury, while Jasmine's is that of the adventure of slumming, but these are the *only* socioeconomic realms that exist. This binary distinction is also reflected in the film as ruler/ruled and master/slave. Wealth is intimately related to political power; as Jaffar remarks, "Whoever has the gold [or oil, perhaps] makes the rules!"⁶⁷

To a certain extent, an awareness did exist in 1992 that the images in *Aladdin* were unrepresentative. When the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee protested the lyrics "where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face" in the opening song, they were changed to "where it's flat and immense and the heat is intense" for the home video release.⁶⁸ The rest of the song, however, remained intact, including the line that immediately follows: "It's barbaric, but hey, it's home."

Perhaps the most entrenched of orientalist tropes in *Aladdin* is its representation of eastern women. In the opening scenes Aladdin passes through a harem while running from a band of guards, hardly what one expects to see in a children's film. While

⁶⁷ *Aladdin* (1992) 27:00.

⁶⁸ John Evan Froom, "Aladdin Lyrics Altered" *Daily Variety*; July 12, 1993; Sect. News, p. 1 (Source: Lexis Nexis); "Aladdin Rubs Arabs the Wrong Way" *Herald Sun*; July 12, 1993 (Source: Lexis Nexis).

masquerading as Prince Ali, he parades into the palace surrounded by scores of barely-clothed dancing girls; later, the genie briefly adopts the role of a girl in another harem. Princess Jasmine herself never appears more than partially clothed, and even adopts the role of a sexual temptress to fool Jaffar later in the film, wearing even less than usual. The opening song informs the viewer that “Arabian nights ... are hotter than hot, in a lot of good ways.” The little man who sings the song refers to Agrabah/Baghdad as the “city of mystery, of enchantment,” at which point he pulls his camel’s face close to his and nuzzles it lovingly, to which the camel responds with an alarmed look. The underlying implication is that western sexual mores do not apply here; the men are sexually deprived and the women are sexually available.

V: *LIVE FROM BAGHDAD*

The constant engagement between Iraq and the West in the 1990s created a concrete backdrop that shaped common perceptions in the latter, and thereby influenced the orientalist iconography apparent in films set in the region. The Arab terrorist became a stock character in the 1990s, as seen in major blockbusters such as *True Lies* (1994) and *The Siege* (1998), and the Middle East in general was represented as threatening. After 9/11, however, “good” Arabs began to play a standard role in American films alongside “bad” Arab terrorists.

Live from Baghdad (2002) provides an example of the nascent political orientalism just beginning to take shape in *Aladdin*. Based on actual events, it attempts to examine the real Middle East, rather than merely depicting it as a setting for a fantasy.

Even so, the legacy of Baghdad's image as a setting for fantasy remains evident. The film begins with an action scene from *Tremors* (1990), which not only dates the setting as soon as it becomes clear the film is being played in a theater, but also hints at what will follow: an exciting and dangerous adventure in the desert.

The Arabs in the theater, however, are quickly recast as innocent victims/"good Arabs" when the viewer realizes they are Kuwaitis who are being invaded by "bad Arabs," the Iraqis. This establishes a dichotomy in which good/bad becomes equivalent to pro-/anti-western, or friendly/unfriendly to the Americans. The first Arab we see up close and hear speak is the customs officer at the airport when CNN producer Robert Wiener and his news crew arrive. We are thus once again viewing Baghdad from an external, tourist perspective. The officer is grumpy, has unattractive teeth and seems bothered that Wiener has twenty-three bottles of vodka "for personal use," which he takes to mean he is an alcoholic.⁶⁹ Wiener dismisses him condescendingly and moves on. He soon finds that a Mr. Mazin has been assigned to follow him everywhere. Mazin fits the image of the typical Arab goon: he sports a big moustache and a leather jacket, never smiles and serves as a source of (slightly creepy) amusement for Wiener and his crew.

On the other hand, Wiener becomes friends with the Minister of Information, Naji Al-Hadithi. They spend time together and speak to each other frankly; Naji, as Wiener calls him, is thus a "good" Arab. Naji seems genuinely to care about Wiener and to want him to do well. He does set him up by sending him to Kuwait,⁷⁰ but he seems to enjoy the

⁶⁹ *Live from Baghdad* (2002) HBO Films; Directed by Mick Jackson, Written by Robert Wiener (based on his book) 7:30.

⁷⁰ He uses Wiener to claim that the stories about babies being abandoned in hospitals is false. It turns out that those stories were, indeed, untrue.

idea that it will make Wiener happy. He buys him a kilo of olives while they are discussing it, a sign that he is attempting to be as accommodating as possible, and also, perhaps, that he wants to share a bit of his culture with him. This is a subtle attempt to move away from the orientalist casting of all easterners as equal. “Good” characters are identified by the western lead, and their friendship allows the viewer to see interaction between East and West on a personal level.

In other respects, however, the legacy of the fantasy films set in Baghdad is still very much alive in *Live from Baghdad*. The film features a traditional shot of a lone minaret set against a vivid red sky with a muezzin calling in the background. The newly-arrived CNN crew drives through the city in a string of cabs past crowded shops selling carpets and women wearing the hejab, at which the enthralled camera-man remarks “Look at this ... straight outta’ Ali Baba.”⁷¹ The departing ABC crew members are packing up their newly acquired carpets when CNN arrives, and when they buy their own later in the film, one of the reporters asks jokingly, “Those things fly?”⁷²

VI: *BODY OF LIES*

A discussion of *Body of Lies* (2008) is a fitting place to conclude because it exemplifies the orientalist aspects typical of contemporary films. In contrast to *Live from Baghdad*, the fantasy of early Baghdad films is completely gone: this is a film completely immersed in the political environment in which it is set. Iraq is the setting for only the first several minutes of the film, and Baghdad itself is never seen, but this conspicuous

⁷¹ Ibid 8:30.

⁷² Ibid 57:00.

avoidance is itself informative. Only one image of Baghdad exists in the minds of contemporary audiences: that of a city of car bombs, marine convoys in danger, and Iraqi politicians and security personnel who are utterly incapable of controlling the situation. Subtitles tell us we are seeing Samarra and an area near Balad, which are unfamiliar to the average viewer, but that is the point. Baghdad itself is a place the filmmakers are reluctant to go, even fictitiously.

The film includes many of the stock features of cinematic orientalism, such as torture and sinister Arab terrorists, but there is also an effort to move beyond stereotypes and blatant xenophobia. The male lead, agent Roger Ferris (played by Leonardo DiCaprio), speaks fluent Arabic and appears to respect Arabs and Arab customs. When his Arab friend, the head of Jordanian intelligence, refers to a passage in the Koran in English, he quotes it from memory in Arabic. Furthermore, the target of his romantic affections is an Iranian/Jordanian woman, and his decision to leave the CIA and remain in Jordan with her provides the film's conclusion. But these moments take place in the context of a film that still portrays the Middle East as a cesspool of extremism, violence and deception.

Moreover, there is a heavily self-incriminatory tone to the film. It begins with a quote from W. H. Auden:

I and the public know
What all the schoolchildren learn,
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.

The opening scenes that follow show the leader of a terrorist organization interlaced with various shots of his supporters looking on. He proclaims that they “will avenge the

American wars on the Muslim World . . . we have bled; now they will bleed.”⁷³ The implication is that this is a problem the United States created. Agent Ferris’s boss, played by Russell Crowe, says to him upon his return to Washington, DC, “Well, hey buddy. Back from the Sandbox? How’re you enjoying civilization? You wanna go and getta hot dog?”⁷⁴ The “sandbox” is just a place where they play, like children. This view that the United States is responsible for creating the current situation thus is another form of the orientalist paradigm because it sees the Middle East as lacking any agency of its own. It is merely a subjected realm where the West can either blunder or successfully protect its interests, but where it is the sole catalyst of events.

The reductionist orientalist stereotype of “good” and “bad” Arabs, meanwhile, is very much alive in *Body of Lies*. Ferris denigrates the station chief in Amman for failing to conduct proper surveillance of the terrorist cell he is tracking, and he responds that they have “exhausted the station’s indigenous-appearing manpower.” Ferris, tongue-in-cheek, replies, “so you don’t have enough good Arab guys to follow the bad Arab guys?”⁷⁵ In this film, however, the lines are blurred: the “bad” Arabs in the film appear to be about to torture Ferris on camera, which is to be expected, but the “good” Arab Ferris befriends also shows him a man in his custody being whipped while strapped to a table naked. When Ferris shows displeasure that he is having someone tortured, he responds: “This is punishment, my dear. It’s a very different thing.”⁷⁶ This kind of cruelty is represented as the norm in the Middle East, regardless of whether those carrying it out are

⁷³ *Body of Lies* (2008) De Line Pictures; Directed by Ridley Scott, Written by William Monohan (based on the book by David Ignatius) (1:15).

⁷⁴ Ibid 104:00.

⁷⁵ Ibid 28:50.

⁷⁶ Ibid 41:28.

“good” or “bad” Arabs. We have thus in some ways come full circle, back to the generic Arabs of *The Thief of Bagdad*.

When Ferris decides to quit and asks his boss sarcastically, “What if I like the Middle East?” he responds with a grin, “Ain’t nobody likes the Middle East, buddy. There’s nothing here to like.”⁷⁷ This is represented negatively as a typical American perspective, suggesting that intolerance toward the Middle East and its inhabitants is ignorant and destructive. The film, however, does little to overcome such orientalist stereotypes.

CONCLUSION

The image of Baghdad in American films has certainly not been static, and there seems to be a serious effort to portray Iraq – and particularly American involvement in Iraq – thoughtfully and realistically, going against the grain of orientalism, whether consciously or not. This is not to say that Hollywood has overcome orientalism; far from it. But taking cinematic representations of Baghdad as an isolated example, Said’s thesis does not seem entirely to hold up. This supports Kennedy’s perspective that orientalism evolves relative to its historical and geographical context. It is also important to note that filmic representations of Baghdad run counter to Said’s idea of power/hegemony, as these films question the governmental powers that be rather than providing them with knowledge or justification. Thus, despite the persistence of a fair amount of “stock” orientalism in these later films, it seems plausible that Hollywood – if it continues to

⁷⁷ Ibid 159:00.

progress in this direction – could move beyond the East/West dichotomy in important ways.

CHAPTER III

JERUSALEM IN FILM: THE ORIENTALIST POLITICS OF CHRISTIAN MYTHOLOGY

Baghdad served as a malleable setting for fantasy in early American cinema largely because filmmakers and viewers alike lacked fixed preconceptions of the city. In contrast, the narrative most often associated with Jerusalem, that of Jesus of Nazareth, is more readily familiar to American minds, and for many it instills a sense of personal and spiritual connection to the city. This overriding impression of Jerusalem's ancient history suggests a specific, fixed representation of the city, as opposed to the more fluid image of Baghdad. Hollywood's Jerusalem, however, undergoes transformations of its own, often driven by the personal religious and political views of the filmmakers.

The story of Jesus of Nazareth is the focus of six of the films explored in this chapter, while three others deal with it indirectly. An analysis of these films, which span from 1912 to 2004, reveals similar patterns to those discussed in the previous chapter, though without the stark shifts resulting from American military entanglement in the Middle East. Comparable trends are apparent, however, mostly related to the protracted struggle between Israelis and Palestinians – as well as other Arabs – over control of the “holy land.” The changing perception of American involvement in the region as a whole is also evident in newer films, which are clearly informed by specific political/military concerns.

Because most of these films deal with the same cast of characters, it is informative to note how their skin color changes over time, and furthermore how the

stated ethnicity of some characters changes. Portrayals of women and sexuality also change, particularly concerning differences between “eastern” and “western” women. Perhaps most illuminating is the shifting assessment of blame for Jesus’ execution, particularly if one considers the progression of these films in light of the evolution of American views of Israel and of American political/military interests in the region. This is not to say that indicating more guilt either on the part of the Romans or the Jews is more or less historically accurate, but to suggest that how individual filmmakers choose to deal with this issue reveals much about the contemporary political/historical context, as well as the very personal nature of American filmmaking with regard to Jerusalem.

I: A HISTORY OF JERUSALEM

The historical accuracy of the Hebrew exodus from Egypt and conquest of much of the Canaanite lands is murky at best, unsubstantiated by archeology and debated by historians. But whatever the reality, the Hebrews were certainly in Canaan by 1200 BCE. Fast-forwarding through the first temple period, which began around 1000 BCE, the Babylonians, who had taken the city in 597, responded to a rebellion in 586 by expelling its inhabitants and destroying the Temple of Solomon.⁷⁸ A shift in regional power from Babylon to Persia resulted in the return of the exiles in 538, and they began work on a new temple in 520.⁷⁹ After several volatile centuries and numerous conquests of Jerusalem following the disintegration of Alexander’s short-lived empire, the Roman General Pompey marched into the city in 63 BCE. Following a string of Jewish rebellions

⁷⁸ Ibid 59-77.

⁷⁹ Ibid 90-94.

in the first century CE, the Roman Titus crushed a Jewish revolt in 70 CE and reduced the temple to a pile of rubble.⁸⁰ Centuries later the city came to be Christian-dominated,⁸¹ until a Muslim army took the city without bloodshed in 638. The Muslim rulers for the first time ruled Jerusalem as a three-faith city, allowing Jews and Christians to live among them, each in their own districts and free to adhere to their own religious practices.

This situation lasted until the crusaders seized Jerusalem in 1099 and slaughtered everyone in the city, probably around 30,000 Muslims and Jews. Saladin,⁸² the first Ayyubid Sultan of Syria and Egypt, who had expanded the area under his control to include the eastern and southeastern Arabian Peninsula (the Hejaz and Yemen) and Mesopotamia, re-took Jerusalem in 1187, and again the Muslim army spared the lives of the city's inhabitants. Thereafter Jerusalem fell under the control of the Mamluks, until the Ottomans took the city in 1516. Jerusalem remained in Ottoman hands until World War I, when in October of 1917 the city's inhabitants surrendered to British General Edward Allenby.⁸³ The establishment of the British Mandate of Palestine was agreed upon at the Paris Peace Conference, and the four years immediately following the war saw a wave of Jewish immigration known as the Third Aliyah.⁸⁴

Amid United Nations attempts to develop a two-state solution to the struggle between Jews and Arabs for statehood, fighting broke out in Palestine in November of

80 Ibid 123-24, 150-52.

81 After its initial growth, Christianity was adopted as the official religion of Rome, causing it to spread much more quickly.

82 صلاح الدين يوسف بن أيوب (Salah alDin Yusuf ibn Ayyub).

83 Karen Armstrong, *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths* Ballantine Books (a division of Random House) New York; 2005 (original Copyright 1996) p. 370.

84 Martin Gilbert, *Israel: A History*. London: Black Swan, 2008. pp. 42-43.

1947. What followed in 1948 was a civil war, military conflict between Jews and all neighboring Arab states, the exodus of tens of thousands of Palestinians and the establishment of the modern State of Israel.⁸⁵ Mandate Palestine was divided between Israel, Jordan and Egypt. The next major military interaction between Israel and its neighbors was in the 1967 Six-Day War, in which Israel launched a surprise attack on Jordan, Syria and Egypt, as they appeared to prepare to attack Israel. The war was a resounding Israeli success and a major humiliation for the Arab countries, contributing to the outbreak of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, an Egyptian and Syrian surprise attack on Israel on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. The Arabs fared much better this time, making significant gains, and it took the Israeli Defense Forces several days to push them back.⁸⁶

As for the control of the city of Jerusalem itself, it was under Ottoman rule until 1917 and then controlled by the British from 1917 until 1948. From 1948 until 1967, authority over the city was divided between Israel and Jordan (the latter controlled the Holy City and all of the holy sites), and it has been under the sole jurisdiction of Israel since 1967. It is against this backdrop that we can understand the evolution of orientalism in American films set in Jerusalem across the twentieth century.

⁸⁵ Karen Armstrong, *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths* pp. 385-94.

⁸⁶ In addition to the specific references noted above, much of the general information in this brief account of Jerusalem's complicated history comes from Karen Armstrong, *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths*; Colin Shindler, *A History of Modern Israel*; Sandra Mackey, *Mirror of the Arab World: Lebanon in Conflict*; Martin Gilbert, *Israel: A History*

II: EARLY REPRESENTATIONS OF THE LIFE OF JESUS

The first major American film to chronicle the life of Jesus was *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912), which was shot entirely on location in Ottoman-ruled Palestine and Egypt in 1911 and 1912. A studio was even built in Jerusalem for shooting the interior scenes.⁸⁷ This is significant, given that most subsequent films about Jesus were shot in the American West and on studio lots in Los Angeles. The opening caption proclaims that the film is “a review of the Saviour’s Life according to the Gospel-narrative,”⁸⁸ and the only additional text (the film is silent) are direct quotations from the gospels. Many of the geographical and racial elements found in *From the Manger to the Cross* continue to appear in the plethora of subsequent American films about Jesus. First and foremost, the life of Christ is represented as being by far the most significant occurrence in the region’s history. American films thus consistently represent the story of Jesus as more important to the history and geography of the region than it actually was. The caption “The scene of this history is the Holy Land”⁸⁹ at the beginning of *From the Manger to the Cross* is followed by a map showing the eastern end of the Mediterranean, with JUDEA, SAMARIA and GALILEA writ large and Jerusalem, Jericho and Bethlehem represented prominently.⁹⁰ This shows what sort of “history” Americans are interested in with regard to the Levant: that of the “Holy Land.” The term “Holy Land” itself only further illustrates the western tendency to project its own interests onto the East.

87 Richard Campbell and Michael Pitts, *The Bible on Film: A Checklist, 1897-1980*. The Scarecrow Press: Metuchen, NJ and London; 1981 p.81.

88 *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) Kalem Company; Directed by Sidney Olcott, Written by Gene Gauntier 0:15.

89 Ibid 0:25.

90 Ibid 0:38.

Another projection of western thinking onto the history of Jerusalem is the representation of Jesus of Nazareth as Caucasian. In every major American film representation in the twentieth century Jesus is white, as are the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and other characters. This is not surprising to western audiences, who have always thought of Jesus as having been white, but this is mingling a Eurocentric version of Christian mythology with actual history. Though the historical evidence is non-existent, it is unlikely that a Galilean Jew would have been pale white, much less have had the sandy blond hair and blue eyes seen in later films. Such an alteration of ethnicity establishes Jesus as “good,” because the orientalist othering of the East creates a dynamic of western/white/good versus eastern/dark/bad. Worshipping a dark-skinned eastern figure would inherently contradict western views of the Orient; therefore Jesus becomes white, meaning that even the most vital occurrence in Middle Eastern history, from the perspective represented in these films, centers around a figure whose very Middle Easternness is eradicated.

The pure, virtuous Virgin Mary is represented as white due to the same paradigm. She is the western Christian ideal of female chastity and propriety. Mary Magdalene, on the other hand, is first seen as a sexual being, an adulteress Jesus saves from being stoned. She thus embodies both the Madonna and the whore, an attractive white woman the western male can think of sexually, but also the reformed, chaste (perhaps even holy) white woman.

Contrary to these figures, Judas in *From the Manger to the Cross* is a sinister figure in black robes with a black beard and more eastern-looking facial features.⁹¹ Consequently, the archetypal human personifications of good and evil to Christian viewers, Jesus and Judas, appear to be western and eastern, respectively. Late in the film, Roman soldiers laugh while the white Jesus is mocked by several dark-skinned Middle Eastern men, and even the soldiers that are seen whipping Jesus are bearded and appear darker than the other Romans.⁹²

The issue of who was responsible for crucifying Jesus varies greatly throughout film history, and in *From the Manger to the Cross* it is certainly the Romans. This is not historically inaccurate, but it is worth noting given that several later films portray the Romans as reluctant participants and as only partially to blame. They are also guilty in D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) – in which the story of Jesus is one of four set in different periods – but that was not the original plan. Griffith is alleged to have shot a version of the crucifixion in which Jews (he supposedly hired several orthodox Jews from the Los Angeles area to play the part) crucified Christ, but he eventually succumbed to pressure from a Jewish organization to reshoot the sequence with Roman soldiers receiving the blame.⁹³

The first shot of Jerusalem in *Intolerance* is preceded by the caption: “Ancient Jerusalem, the golden city whose people have given us many of our highest ideals, and from the carpenter shop of Bethlehem, sent us the Man of Men, the greatest enemy of

91 Ibid 50:30 Incidentally, the role of Judas was played by Robert Fignola, an Italian, while Jesus was played by an Englishman. Source: www.imdb.com.

92 *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) 1:04:00-1:06:00.

93 Richard Campbell and Michael Pitts, *The Bible on Film: A Checklist, 1897-1980*. p. 93.

intolerance.”⁹⁴ This “man of men,” of course, is white, as is the Virgin Mary.⁹⁵ Though the Romans are blamed for crucifying Jesus, Judaism is specifically referenced in *Intolerance*, as it was not in *From the Manger to the Cross*. When Jesus turns water into wine, lest a wedding party end prematurely and the (Caucasian) bride and groom be embarrassed, the following caption appears: “The first miracle. The turning of water into wine.” And at the bottom of the screen: “Note: – Wine was deemed a fit offering to God; the drinking of it a part of the Jewish religion.”⁹⁶ This is significant for a number of reasons. The American Protestant view of alcohol as taboo requires an explanation of the appearance of wine, and in the process the “Jewish religion” is distinguished from Christianity.

The orientalist perceptions evident in these early films did not spring to life in 1916, of course, but rather emerged from the cinema’s artistic forebears, on which early filmmakers such as Griffith relied heavily, as many later filmmakers would come to rely on him. This is important because the orientalism in these films can be traced to the orientalism in various other forms of art, many of which Said discusses in *Orientalism*. Griffith utilized “elements from music, painting, theater, poetry and novels”⁹⁷ in the production of *Intolerance*, and depended on paintings in particular as a source of visual inspiration, especially for the creation of the Babylonian and Judean settings. Griffith’s mise-en-scène, in fact, often references specific paintings, such as *The Babylonian Marriage Market* by Edwin Long, which is strikingly similar to the marriage market

94 *Intolerance* (1916) Triangle Film Corporation; Directed and Written by D.W. Griffith 7:10.

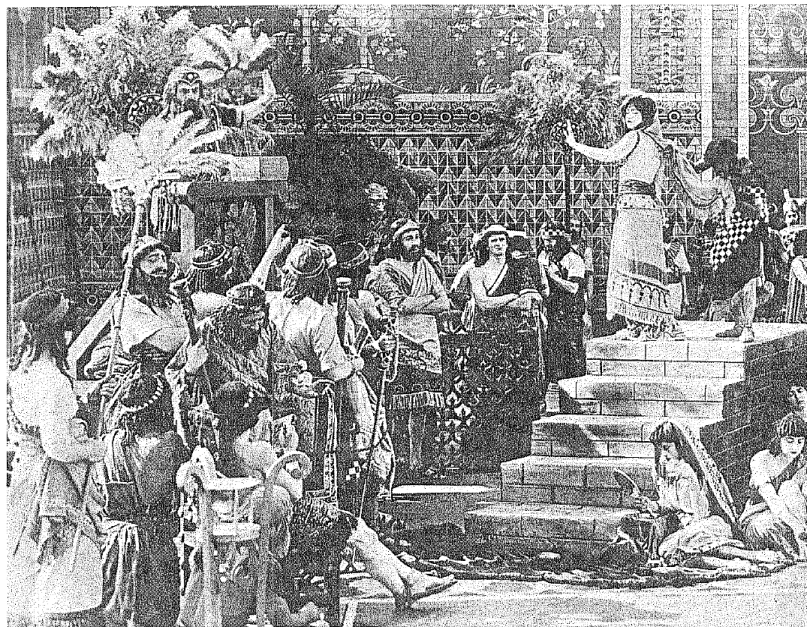
95 Source: www.imdb.com.

96 *Intolerance* (1916) 56:50.

97 William M. Drew, *D.W. Griffith’s Intolerance: Its Genesis and its Vision*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1986. p. 63.



The Babylonian Marriage Market (1875) by Edwin Long⁹⁸



Depiction of the Babylonian Marriage Market in *Intolerance*⁹⁹

⁹⁸ *The Babylonian Marriage Market* by Edwin Long. Source: The Yorck Project: 10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei. DVD-ROM, 2002. Distributed by DIRECTMEDIA Publishing GmbH.

⁹⁹ Misc-en-scène of the marriage market from the Babylonian story in *Intolerance*. Copied from: William M. Drew, *D.W. Griffith's Intolerance: Its Genesis and its Vision* p. 72.

Griffith created for *Intolerance*. Pictured on the previous page, note the identical platform, the stance of the man and woman on it, the row of seated women awaiting their turn at auction on one side, and the horde of potential purchasers standing on the other.

III: *BEN HUR*

In addition to being based on the same story, which provides a stable backdrop for examining how American films portrayed Jerusalem and its inhabitants differently over the course of time, many of these films are actually remakes. This provides an even more fixed sampling from which to draw conclusions about the evolving perceptions of the region in the US. Three versions of *Ben Hur* were produced, in 1907, 1925 and 1959; the latter two are discussed here. The story of Judah Ben Hur, a Jewish prince in Jerusalem during the life of Jesus, provides a template for showing certain iconic scenes from Christian mythology within the context of an action/melodrama, complete with romance, epic battle scenes and a persevering hero. Both versions portray Judah's struggle against Roman oppression, but there is a stark difference in terms of the depiction of ethnicity.

The 1925 version of *Ben Hur* begins with the captions:

Pagan Rome was at the zenith of her power. The tread of her iron legions shook the world; and from every land rose the cries of captive people -- praying for a deliverer.

In Judea the glory that was Israel's lay scattered in the dust -- and Jerusalem the Golden, conquered and oppressed, wept in the shadow of her walls.¹⁰⁰

The focus is clearly that "Pagan" Rome is oppressing all its subjects, and it is implied that religion, personified by the prayed-for deliverer -- whose story the audience already

¹⁰⁰ *Ben Hur* (1925) Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer; Directed by Fred Niblo and Written by Lew Wallace (novel) and June Mathis (adaptation).

knows – will bring about its downfall, and with it freedom from oppression. The main focus of the film is the story of Judah, but as he is the film’s hero, he is Caucasian, as are his mother, sister, and the female lead, Esther, who becomes his wife. Otherwise, ethnicity is quite jumbled, as is geography. The Maji, the three wise men from “the East” referred to in the Gospel of Matthew, are presented in *Ben Hur* as “Melchior – the Hindoo,” “Gaspar – the Greek” and “Balthazaar – the Egyptian.”¹⁰¹ These are three of the numerous names the Maji have been given, but it is strange that two of these men from the “East” come from Greece and Egypt. This is another example of the Saidian concept of the amalgamated, “unchanging East” discussed in the previous chapter. Along the same lines, one of the “shepards in the field” who is called to pay homage to the newborn Jesus is wearing a leopard-skin loincloth.¹⁰² Leopards and their hides, it seems, are the omnipresent label in western films to denote oriental exoticism.

Not only is the Virgin Mary Caucasian in *Ben Hur*, but there is a brief sequence shot in color after the birth of Jesus that shows that she has strawberry-blond hair. Esther, who is also supposed to be Jewish, has blond hair as well. One of Jesus’ few appearances is his intervention in the stoning of a Caucasian Mary Magdalene at the hands of angry, bearded men who appear much more “Eastern.” Light-skinned Jews are thus “good,” while those with darker skin are “bad,” just as Arabs and ancient Egyptians are divided by skin tone in other films.

The references to Arabs and the roles they play in all of these films change as general awareness of and sentiment toward Arabs/Palestinians – as well as Jews/Israelis –

¹⁰¹ Ibid 14:40.

¹⁰² Ibid 12:38.

shifts in accordance with the progression of twentieth-century history. This is evident in the differences between these two versions of *Ben Hur*. The 1925 version only makes reference to Arabs twice (in captions, as the film is silent). Once is to a Sheikh “known throughout the East for his fiery racing Arabs.”¹⁰³ “Arabs” refers to his horses, of course, but the term “Sheikh” identifies him as an Arab, at least to the average American viewer. The Romans again receive the blame for Jesus’ crucifixion, and as he staggers to his death the caption reads: “In the thousands that looked on – Romans, Jews, Greeks, Arabs, Syrians, Easterners. It seemed the whole world was represented along that tragic way.”¹⁰⁴ This plays into the idea that this was a major turning point for all peoples suffering under the yoke of “Pagan” Rome; that they were saved both in spiritual and earthly terms. The happy ending for Judah and his family, however, is invented: had such a character existed, he would have continued to live in a Jerusalem ruled by Rome,¹⁰⁵ which, incidentally, brutally put down a number of Jewish rebellions over the next century. The viewer has the sense, however, that Judah Ben Hur is like Moses, come to lead all Jews from tyranny to a free Israel.

Indeed, the actor who plays Judah, Charlton Heston, *was* Moses in *The Ten Commandments* (1956) just three years before. Moreover, the story is strikingly similar. Moses goes from a prince in the favor of the highest levels of power among those ruling his Hebrew brethren, to a slave of the lowest order, and then returns to challenge the rule of those who condemned him, finding God somewhere along the way. Indeed, Heston’s

103 Ibid 1:08:30.

104 Ibid 2:13:00.

105 As well as the Herodian kings, who will be discussed in conjunction with later films.

role in *The Ten Commandments* may well have influenced the heavier concentration in *Ben Hur* on the plight of Jews specifically, rather than all Roman subjects, but this theme also makes sense historically. The Holocaust doubtless affected the American perception of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and the formation of an independent Israel, and these events clearly informed the 1959 version of *Ben Hur*. An ancient map at the film's outset shows the viewer "JUDÆA," in text twice the size of the rest, and designating an area that clearly envelopes Jerusalem and Bethlehem, while "PALÆSTINA" is much smaller and further down the Mediterranean coast. This is not historically inaccurate, as the Romans only later designated the whole area as Palestine. But it is important because this map emphasizes that this area was once called Judea, strengthening Zionist claims to the land.

The Romans in the 1959 *Ben Hur* refer to the Jews they rule as rowdy and "drunk with religion,"¹⁰⁶ and again they are blamed for Christ's crucifixion. The Sheikh in this version is a more colorful character (literally and figuratively) who embodies a number of orientalist stereotypes present in the early Baghdad films. It is not hard to glean that he is a white man wearing brown make-up;¹⁰⁷ his accoutrements include a large curved knife and gold earrings. He is surprised to learn Judah has no wives, and responds, "I have six ... no, seven." His friend chimes in, "I've counted eight, and that is because he is traveling. At home he has more."¹⁰⁸ When Judah says he would like one wife someday the Sheikh laughs, "One wife?! Ha, ha. One God, that I can understand, but one wife, that

¹⁰⁶ Ibid 11:56.

¹⁰⁷ The Sheik is played by Hugh Griffith, a Welshman by birth who served in the British army during WWII in India and Burma. The hand of empyreal military thus becomes the masquerading oriental. Source: www.imdb.com.

¹⁰⁸ *Ben Hur* (1959) 1:36:40.

is not civilized.”¹⁰⁹ He then expects Judah to burp loudly to show that he enjoyed his meal. The viewer thus sees all the normal manner of tropes, such as lavish wealth, poor manners and polygamy. The Sheikh also appears to be a monotheist, which is not entirely absurd, although the idea that he is a Muslim certainly is. Nevertheless, it seems likely that the Muslim Arab Sheikh had become such a stock oriental character by 1959 that it was hard for filmmakers or viewers to break away from it. There is also a typical suggestion of sexual depravity on his part, as he treats his four horses, his “beauties,” like wives, and Judah even mistakes his reference to them as a reference to his wives (or at least to concubines): “Now I must say goodnight to my beauties. When they’re ready for sleep they get impatient, and jealous. They wait to see which one I will embrace first.”¹¹⁰

In spite of their moral and religious differences, Judah and the Sheikh become friends. Judah races his chariot horses against Messala, the Roman he had known as a boy who later condemned him and his family. Arab and Jew thus unite to defeat the lead representative of the Christ-killing Romans, who believe the emperor “is god, the only god, real power on earth.”¹¹¹ The happy ending, therefore, is independent Jewish possession of Jerusalem, along with friendship between Jews and Arabs.

IV: KING OF KINGS AND THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD

A comparison of several films focusing on the life of Jesus from the 1920s and the 1960s reveals many of the same shifts evident between the two versions of *Ben Hur*

¹⁰⁹ Ibid 1:37:00.

¹¹⁰ Ibid 1:37:45.

¹¹¹ Ibid 25:00.

discussed above. Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927) chronicles the adult life of Jesus with a focus on his divinity, often employing direct quotes from the gospels, similar to *From the Manger to the Cross* and *Intolerance*, but it also contains many of the "amalgamated East" stereotypes seen in the Baghdad films of the same period. Despite the similar title, *King of Kings* (1961) is not truly a remake of DeMille's film, as it recounts the story of Jesus' entire life and places greater emphasis on the earthly aspects of Jewish resistance against Roman domination. *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) is similar in this respect, and even seems to borrow many of its character portrayals from *King of Kings*.

DeMille begins *The King of Kings* with the caption: "The events portrayed by this picture occurred in Palestine nineteen centuries ago, when the Jews were under the complete subjection of Rome – even their own High Priest being appointed by the Roman procurator."¹¹² This pre-state-of-Israel reference to Palestine as the greater eastern Mediterranean lacks the historical accuracy of the map seen in the 1959 *Ben Hur*, but more importantly it lacks the implication that Jews do have a legitimate, historical claim to the land. The statement about the High Priest reflects the idea that Rome was ultimately to blame for Christ's crucifixion. Caiaphas in this version – though he is not explicitly named as such – is merely a puppet of Rome.

The film begins late in Jesus' life with a depiction of Roman and oriental men lounging in decadence. The caption reads: "In Judea – groaning under the iron heel of

¹¹² *The King of Kings* (1927) DeMille Pictures Corporation; Directed by Cecil B. DeMille and Written by Jeanie Macpherson – DeMille's signature appears below the caption, as if to say these are his words and he signs off on their validity.

Rome – the beautiful courtesan, MARY of MAGDALA, laughed alike at God and Man.”¹¹³ She is scantily-clad and Caucasian, similar to western women masquerading as oriental temptresses in the early Baghdad films, but she is also depicted as Judas’ scorned lover and is under the impression he has left her for another woman. Informed that Judas actually left her to follow a carpenter from Nazareth, she bets she can win him back, to which an old man responds that he will wager “Cleopatra’s ring”¹¹⁴ she is wrong. This again captures the idea of the East as one timeless geographic constant, as do the leopard and monkey on leashes in the background and the chariots drawn by zebras that appear and whisk her away. When Jesus makes his appearance he is Caucasian and appears to have blond hair and a blond beard, as opposed to the darker-skinned men he prevents from stoning the adulteress. It is interesting to note that later in the film he dramatically raises the shroud-wrapped Lazarus from the dead, to the amazement of onlookers. This film, like the others that depict this key piece of Christian mythology, venerates what is essentially the magical resurrection of a mummy as a miracle, evidence of Christ’s divinity.¹¹⁵ This is important in light of the cinematic representation of Egyptian mummies, discussed at length in chapter four.

King of Kings (1961) reveals an entirely different socio-political backdrop regarding American perceptions of Jews and Arabs. The film begins in 63 BCE with a view of marching Roman legions “laying waste the land of Canaan and the Kingdom of

113 Ibid 1:58.

114 Ibid 7:12.

115 This will be discussed further in the following chapter with regard to “mummy films.”

Judea.”¹¹⁶ Pompey has the High Priests in Jerusalem killed and invades their temple looking for gold statues, finding instead a scroll handed down by Moses. Thus the Roman motivation for conquering Judea is simply greed, but the surprising aspect of Roman rule is that they “slaughtered and enslaved” the Jews but could not find a Jew through whom to rule, so they used an Arab: “Caesar named one Herod the Great, an Arab of the Bedouin tribe, as the new, false, and maleficent King of the Jews.”¹¹⁷

Herod the Great was actually an Idumean,¹¹⁸ a mythological descendant of Esau, the elder brother of Jacob, whose twelve sons’ descendants became the twelve tribes of Israel. In 37 BCE he reconquered Jerusalem, which had been taken by the Parthians¹¹⁹ about three years earlier, and was elected King of the Jews by the Roman senate. He launched a rebuilding campaign and restored much of the city, but Jerusalem came under loose Roman control around 20 BCE, and Rome took full control upon his death in 4 BCE, keeping his dynasty in place though splitting the kingdom up among his sons. Jerusalem came under the control of Herod’s son Herod Archelous, whose son Agrippa I took over in 6 CE, thereafter reuniting his grandfather’s kingdom. Both *King of Kings* and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* show only two Herodian kings: Herod the Great, who is depicted as having been alive at the birth of Christ, and his son (apparently his only son), sometimes referred to as Herod Agrippa, but to whom I will refer as Herod II for

116 *King of Kings* (1961) Samuel Bronston Productions; Directed by Nicholas Ray and Written by Philip Yordan 6:40.

117 Ibid 10:00.

118 This is synonymous with Edomite.

119 The Parthian Empire was based in what is now northern Iran.

the sake of clarity.¹²⁰ The recasting of Herod the Great as an Arab is crucial because he and Herod II play key roles in the film and are largely responsible for the oppression of the Jews and Jesus' crucifixion. Jews, on the other hand, receive no blame for this (Caiaphas does not make an appearance in either film), while Arabs become complicit in Christ's crucifixion.

There is also a heavy emphasis in *King of Kings* on an armed Jewish rebellion against the Romans. Barrabas leads "10,000 rebel Jews,"¹²¹ ambushes Roman legions, and sees Jesus as a rival resistance leader. Romans discussing Barrabas even say that "they call themselves patriots."¹²² Given the American sense of "patriot" as associated with armed rebellion and the establishment of an independent state, this carries an anachronistic, post-1948 implication. Barrabas later takes advantage of the large crowds gathered to hear Jesus speak in Jerusalem as an opportunity to overthrow Roman rule, though the attempt ends with their utter decimation at the hands of Roman soldiers. Judas' betrayal of Jesus is even portrayed as an earnest attempt to force Jesus' hand, to make him join the armed rebellion. In a sense, this is a post-Holocaust fantasy akin to *Inglourious Basterds*, recasting a band of Jews as combatants rather than victims, but they have to lose in the end for the film to reach its foregone conclusion. Some Romans actually seem convinced by Jesus, however, and show regret that the crowds demanded Barrabas be released instead of him. This depiction of the Romans as a brutal empire, but

120 Technically Herod the Great was Herod II, but as the character of his son in both films is an amalgamation of his sons and grandsons, it is simply easier to refer to the two characters in the films as Herod and Herod II.

121 *King of Kings* (1961) 23:00.

122 *Ibid* (33:10).

not solely to blame for the crucifixion, coincides with the ahistorical implication that Arabs, by way of Herod, had something to do with it.

These shifts in political consciousness aside, the ethnic and gender aspects of orientalism evident in these films remain the same as those in the 1910s and 1920s. Jesus in both films is Caucasian and has fair hair and blue eyes. The Virgin Mary is also Caucasian, in juxtaposition to the wife and stepdaughter of Herod II, who in both films are darker, scantily-clad and delight in the infliction of suffering on Jews. Herod II in *King of Kings* lusts after his stepdaughter and drunkenly begs her to dance for him, offering her anything she wants in return, even the throne of her mother (who is in the room). She agrees and performs a long, erotic belly dance, then demands in return the head of John the Baptist on a silver plate. Herod II reluctantly acquiesces. The roles are reversed in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, as Herod II is pursued by his stepdaughter, who voluntarily dances around him after he orders John the Baptist beheaded, with a number of other partially-dressed eastern women dancing to lyre music in the background. There is little difference, though, in the portrayal of oriental women as sexually unchaste and morally depraved.

V: REINTERPRETING THE LIFE OF JESUS

The Greatest Story Ever Told was the last of the epic life of Christ films, largely because it was a box office failure. In addition to this economic rationale, however, the 1967 Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War of 1973 drastically altered American perceptions of Israel. Cinematic representation of ancient Jerusalem would thereafter

have the volatile and confusing contemporary Jerusalem looming ominously in the background. This helps account for the fact that American filmmakers seldom engaged the issue of Jerusalem, and when they did so it was in an experimental way, such as in the musicals *Godspell* (1973) and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) and in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). This is a specifically American dynamic, however, and traditional life-of-Christ films continued to be made in Europe during this period. A brief examination of a particular British comedy set in ancient Jerusalem during this time will underline the singular nature of American orientalism in such films.

Monty Python's Life of Brian (1979) contains revealing references that it is hard to imagine appearing in an American film during this period. Most conspicuously, members of the People's Front of Judea constantly refer to each other as terrorists, and the Romans call it a terrorist organization. They plan to take Pilate's wife hostage and execute her if their demands are not met, all except for "Reg, [who] will not be taking part in any terrorist action, as he has a bad back."¹²³ This is satire, of course, but it implies that Jews once did to the Romans precisely what Palestinian Arabs were then doing to them. There is also a meeting of the People's Front of Judea at which Reg proclaims the group's defiance of Rome and asks sarcastically, "What have they ever done for us?"¹²⁴ The response is that Rome has given them quite a lot, in fact, including aqueducts, sanitation, roads, irrigation, medicine, education, wine, public baths, and the safety to walk in the streets at night, to which is added, "They certainly like to keep order,

¹²³ *Life of Brian* (1979) HandMade Films; Directed by Terry Jones and Written by Graham Chapman and John Cleese 26:20.

¹²⁴ *Ibid* 23:46.

and let's face it, they're the only ones who could in a place like this."¹²⁵ The suggestion here is that the various peoples of Jerusalem were far better off when ruled by a well-developed, white, European empire, obviously reflecting a uniquely British view of British Mandate Palestine versus the multiple wars that accompanied and followed Israeli independence.

Turning to American films, Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* is a complete departure from earlier films chronicling the life of Jesus in that it evinces a more liberal political stance, but it nevertheless contains many of the same orientalist aspects. Contrary to earlier films, which relied heavily on direct quotations from the Gospels, an opening caption informs the viewer that "this film is not based upon the Gospels but upon this fictional exploration of the eternal spiritual conflict."¹²⁶ William Dafoe as Jesus is a schizophrenic carpenter who builds crosses for the Romans, while his friend Judas (Harvey Keitel) attempts to enlist him in organized armed resistance against Rome. The film follows Jesus' personal struggle with the voices in his head and the temptations around him, but also depicts some of the standard scenes in Christian mythology. He saves Mary Magdalene – in this version a prostitute with whom he was once involved – from being stoned and turns water into wine. He also raises Lazarus from the dead in a scene similar to that in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*.

Blame is not heavily weighted toward Romans or Jews in this version. In fact, the High Priests at the temple seem more confused upon Jesus' arrival than anything else,

¹²⁵ Ibid 24:24.

¹²⁶ *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) Cineplex-Odeon Films; Directed by Martin Scorsese and Written by Nikos Kazantzakis (novel) and Paul Schrader (screenplay).

and Jesus forces Judas to inform on him. Pilate offers Jesus, whom he sees as a common criminal, an easy way out, but he belligerently forces his hand. Scorsese's unwillingness to assess blame, however, is undermined by the film's racial composition. Jesus and his followers are white, as is Mary. As he carries his cross through heavy crowds down narrow streets he is surrounded by a myriad of dark, bearded men and veiled, conspicuously oriental women. This scene lasts a full minute, in slow motion, and the viewer sees only dark, sinister "orientals" surrounding the fair-haired, Caucasian Jesus. As in *Ben Hur*, "good" Jews are thus distinguished from "bad" Jews by having lighter skin, blurring the boundaries of orientalism and, in effect, bringing select "orientals" over to the former side of the self/other divide.

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) is a big-budget attempt to chronicle the events of the last days of the life of Jesus, but departs entirely from films like *King of Kings* and *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. It has an agenda and politics all its own, but it also aspires to capture a uniquely realistic image of ancient Jerusalem. Latin, Hebrew and Aramaic are the only languages spoken in the film, giving it a powerful aura of authenticity. The general cast of characters appears convincingly Middle Eastern as well, except, of course, for Jesus, Mary and Mary Magdalene. Jesus is played by Jim Caviezel, an actor of mixed Slavic, Swiss and Irish descent; the Virgin Mary is Romanian; and Mary Magdalene is Italian, meaning that all three have dark hair and eyes in the film. Several typical orientalist tropes do appear in the film, however, particularly in the scene in which Pilate orders Jesus taken to Herod for sentencing. Herod is a plump, effeminate character with a comic beard and hair. One of his lackeys passes out drunk

and the rest howl with laughter, among them a morbidly obese courtesan, a dwarf covered in gold jewelry and, as always, a leopard on a leash. Herod marvels at Jesus and asks for a miracle, then quickly loses interest and has him sent away, like a spoiled child with a new toy. The combination of all of these characters gathered in lavish, drunken corruption is a visual overdose of orientalism.

Gibson's politics and devout Catholicism shape the film's plot, as every effort is made to remove blame from the Romans and place it on Caiaphas and the other Jewish religious leaders. When Roman soldiers stumble on the chaotic scene after Jesus' arrest by the High Priests, Mary Magdalene runs to tell them that the arrest was made at night to hide it from them. Caiaphas pushes her away, claiming she is crazy and explaining they are simply questioning someone for breaking the temple laws. The soldiers smell trouble brewing, as does Pilate's wife Claudia, who seems inclined to believe Jesus. Pilate responds: "Do you want to know my idea of trouble, Claudia? This stinking outpost, that filthy rabble out there."¹²⁷ He is then shocked when Caiaphas informs him they have brought Jesus for him to judge because their doctrine prohibits the use of the death penalty. As to why Jesus would deserve that, Caiaphas claims Jesus "taught foul, disgusting doctrine."¹²⁸ Seeing Pilate is unimpressed, he adds that Jesus has become the leader of a huge and dangerous sect. Pilate sends Jesus to Herod, who sends him right back, and then refuses to kill him, ordering him punished then released. The High Priests solemnly look on while Jesus is brutally whipped, then return to Pilate and continue to

¹²⁷ *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) Icon Productions; Directed by Mel Gibson and Written by Benedict Fitzgerald and Mel Gibson 38:30.

¹²⁸ *Ibid* 39:50.

demand he be killed. Pilate offers to release either Barrabas, who is a hideous creature, or Jesus and is dumfounded when they cheer for Barrabas and demand Jesus be crucified. He gives in, but says he is innocent of Jesus' blood. Thus the Romans are conflicted, uneasy about killing Jesus but wary of the rowdy mob of oriental Jews. Caiaphas and the other High Priests, meanwhile, are a vicious band of zealots who demand Jesus be tortured and executed because he threatens their control over the Jewish masses. This is a good example of the influence of political opinions about the Middle East manifesting themselves differently. Gibson's film is an exception to the generally pro-Israeli tilt of the films discussed here, and the larger body of works from which they were selected. It represents Rome as a positive force in Palestine (again, a white, western empire, like the British), whereas the Romans in *The Passion of the Christ* try but are ultimately unable to control the bloodthirsty orientals. Gibson's take on the life of Jesus therefore shows his idiosyncratic and virulently anti-Semitic vision of history.

CONCLUSION

The general shift in American perceptions of Baghdad from orientalist fantasy to terrorist breeding-ground might seem far easier to trace in film than does the complex history of Jerusalem, but this examination of a specific selection of films – meant to be representative of the greater body of works from which they were selected – has shown that similar shifts in orientalism are evident. What is important is to note the unmistakable relationship between the historical context surrounding the relationship between the US and the specific region or location represented in a given film. In

addition, the specific perceptions and opinions of the filmmakers play a significant role, in large measure because films about Jerusalem inevitably involve the religious convictions of their creators.

The following chapter covers films set in Egypt, which in contrast to those set in Baghdad or Jerusalem remain so deeply rooted in stereotypically orientalist representations that they seem immune to incursions of contemporary American interactions with the region. Furthermore, though Said suggested that all forms of orientalism are inherently negative, much of the cinematic orientalist illustration of Egypt is at least somewhat positive.

CHAPTER IV

CLEOPATRA, MOSES AND MUMMIES: ORIENTALISM IN CINEMATIC EGYPT

Egypt's relationship with the United States has evolved significantly over the course of the twentieth century, shifting from a peripheral ally to an opponent, as the British-controlled protectorate morphed in the 1950s into Nasser's pro-Soviet, socialist-leaning state, and finally to a partner: in the 1970s Egypt abruptly switched sides in the Cold War, making peace with Israel despite widespread disapproval among its Arab neighbors, and joining the US-led coalition that ousted Saddam Hussein's forces from Kuwait. It is surprising, then – especially considering the shifts evident in films set in Baghdad and Jerusalem that reflect changes in their historical milieu – that similar shifts are not apparent in American films set in Egypt. Instead, American cinematic representations of Egypt have failed to break through the stereotypes of orientalism and move beyond the dichotomy of West/East. Earlier orientalist modes of visualizing Egypt persist, contributing to a deeply-rooted vision that continues to flourish in the American cinematic imagination. The numerous versions of *The Mummy* and *Cleopatra* operate like miniature genres in and of themselves, the former a blend of adventure, horror and mystery, and the latter romance meets historical epic. These depictions of ancient Egyptian society so permeate American ideas about Egypt that the existence of the modern state has very little impact on representations of its past, even in films set in the twentieth century.

I: A BRIEF HISTORY OF EGYPT

The Suez Canal was built in partnership with the French in the 1860s, and when financially-troubled Egypt was forced to sell its share to Britain in 1875 to ease the weight of massive debt to European banks, Britain and France gained overwhelming power over Egyptian affairs. Egypt formally became a British Protectorate on the eve of the First World War, and then in 1922 began what has been called a “liberal experiment.”¹²⁹ A parliament was established, but the king retained considerable power, enabling him to limit its authority. In July 1952, a group of young army officers orchestrated a coup d’état and overthrew the government.¹³⁰ One of the group’s key figures, Gamal Abdul Nasser, became president in 1956. After British forces completed their withdrawal from the Suez Canal Zone that year, he nationalized the canal, prompting the tripartite attack from Britain, France and Israel in October of 1956. The US, which had been uninformed of the aggressors’ plans, strongly opposed the move and a UN ceasefire was negotiated after only a week of fighting.¹³¹ Egyptian intervention in Yemen on the side of counter-revolutionary forces – creating tensions with Saudi Arabia, which had a close relationship with the US – as well as the American deployment of marines in Lebanon and the sale of sophisticated weaponry to the Israelis strained US-Egyptian relations.¹³²

Nasser’s death in 1970 brought about a shift in Egyptian foreign and domestic policy. His vice president and successor was Anwar Sadat, who saw the threat of another

¹²⁹ Afaf Lutfi Al-Sayyid Marsot, *A Short History of Modern Egypt*. Cambridge, Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1985. ch. 5.

¹³⁰ Ibid 82-106.

¹³¹ Ibid 107-116.

¹³² Ibid 119.

war in conjunction with renewed negotiations with the US as the best means of regaining Sinai, which Egypt had lost in 1907. Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack on Israel in October 1973, and Sadat was able to take credit for the Egyptian “victory,” which enabled him to negotiate a peace with Israel, despite strident protests from Egypt’s Arab neighbors. As relations between Sadat and the Soviet Union cooled, the US helped broker an Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement in 1979. American and European banks began to operate in Egypt, as Sadat carried out a major economic policy change, which he referred to as “al-infitah,” or “openness.”¹³³ He began to liberalize Egypt’s socialist economic structure and welcomed foreign investment.¹³⁴

An indication of the new American view of Sadat’s Egypt, former Presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter all attended Anwar Sadat’s funeral after his assassination by Islamic radicals in 1981, and relations with his successor, Hosni Mubarak, remain strong to this day. Egypt contributed 40,000 troops to the US-led coalition that ousted Saddam Hussein’s forces from Kuwait in 1991,¹³⁵ and only last year President Barak Obama chose Cairo as his forum from which to address the greater Arab and Muslim world.

II: THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

The 1923 and 1956 versions of *The Ten Commandments*, both directed by Cecil B. DeMille, reflect contemporary American political perspectives and international

133 الانفتاح

134 Arthur Goldschmidt, *Modern Egypt: The Formation of a Nation State* pp. 168-69, 199.

135 Ibid 182-84, 190.

relations, as the way the struggle between the Hebrew slaves and their Egyptian overlords is defined reveals a great deal about the periods in which each of these films were made.

The 1923 *The Ten Commandments* begins with a caption explaining that:

Our modern world [...] laughed at the Ten Commandments as OLD FASHIONED. Then, through the laughter, came the shattering thunder of the World War. And now a blood-drenched, bitter world – no longer laughing – cries for a way out. There is but one way out. It existed before it was engraven upon Tablets of Stone. It will exist when stone has crumbled. The Ten Commandments are not rules to obey as a personal favor to God. They are the fundamental principles without which mankind cannot live together.¹³⁶

This view that turning away from God resulted in the horrors of the First World War aligns with the struggle to understand the catastrophic toll of the war in the early 1920s, but DeMille's later re-make of the film tells an entirely different story. At the outset of the 1956 *The Ten Commandments*, DeMille himself appears on an empty stage and addresses the audience. After explaining how the story of Moses was pieced together – supposedly from reliable historical sources – he goes on to add that:

The theme of this picture is whether man ought to be ruled by God's law or whether they are to be ruled by the whims of a dictator like Rameses. Are men the property of the state, or are they free souls under God? This same battle continues throughout the world today. Our intention was not to create a story, but to be worthy of the divinely inspired story created 3,000 years ago - - the five books of Moses.¹³⁷

This again looks to the story of Moses as a source of wisdom relevant to modern-day problems, but the focus has shifted to address the issue of individual liberty in conjunction with a belief in God, versus being “the property of the state” and “ruled by

¹³⁶ *The Ten Commandments* (1923) Paramount Pictures; Directed by Cecil B. DeMille, Written by Jeanie Macpherson. Introductory captions, 2:00.

¹³⁷ *The Ten Commandments* (1956) Motion Picture Associates; Directed by Cecil B. DeMille, Written by J.H. Ingraham and A.E. Southon. From the introductory narration by DeMille.

the whims of a dictator.”¹³⁸ The statement that this “battle continues throughout the world today” further underlines the Cold War context perceptible in the previous lines. This conspicuous shift in the ideology of the two films, however, reflects the transformation of American perceptions of the outside world as a whole, rather than Egypt specifically.

The ethnic composition of both versions of the film is similar to that in the biblical films discussed in the previous chapter. The “good” characters are white and the “bad” characters have darker skin. Moses is white, as are the female leads, regardless of whether they are Egyptian, Hebrew or Bedouin. In the 1923 version, the simple clothing of Moses and the other Hebrews contrasts starkly with the ornate yet skimpy dress of the ruling Egyptians and the leopard-skin loin cloths worn by the Egyptian slave drivers.¹³⁹ This contrast between chaste, virtuous Hebrew slaves and the exotic decadence of their heathen Egyptian overlords is carried to greater lengths in the 1956 version. A bronzed Yul Brynner and Edward G. Robinson, who portray Rameses and Dathan, are the film’s darkest characters, both in skin tone and persona. There is a stark contrast between Ramses and his rival, Charlton Heston as Moses, as well as his bride, Nefretiri, who prefers Moses. This contrast is mirrored by Dathan’s extortion of the slave girl Lilian’s virtue in exchange for her lover’s life. In both cases, dark, sinister men come to possess the unwilling, fair-skinned loves of their virtuous Hebrew rivals. This depiction of the idyllic female as white is stated flatly by Sephora, the Bedouin shepherd girl who

138 Ibid.

139 *The Ten Commandments* (1923) 4:00.



Rameses.



Dathan.

becomes Moses' wife, as she inquires about the Egyptian woman whom she presumes hurt Moses: "Her skin was white as curd, her eyes green as the cedars of Lebanon, her lips tamarisk honey. Like the breast of a dove, her arms were soft ... and the wine of desire was in her veins." When Moses admits she is right, she goes on to say, "Our hands are not so soft, but they can serve. Our bodies not so white, but they are strong."¹⁴⁰

In addition to skin color, many typical orientalist stereotypes are apparent in these films. In the 1923 *The Ten Commandments*, after Moses confronts Pharaoh and starts to leave his chamber, he turns to see a girl performing an exotic dance for him and appears deeply saddened by this depravity.¹⁴¹ There is also a dance scene in the 1956 version, in which six of Jethro's daughters compete to be the one chosen by Moses as his wife.

¹⁴⁰ *The Ten Commandments* (1956) 2:00:00.

¹⁴¹ *The Ten Commandments* (1923) 12:51.



Nefritiri and Moses.



Sephora.

But Moses graciously declines and chooses the oldest daughter, Sephora, the only one who did not dance.¹⁴² The idea of the East as a land of incongruous exotic wildlife is present as well, in the form of leopard skins. In addition to their use as clothing by the Egyptians in the 1923 version, a live lion on a leash lurks in the background as a servant brings Pharaoh his dead son's body.¹⁴³ This marker of eastern exoticism also appears in the scene in which the newly-liberated Hebrews lose their way, as Moses communes with God on Mount Sinai. As they dance around the golden calf, several of them crawl on all fours covered in tiger skins, and more skins lie on the ground.

III: CLEOPATRA

The story of Cleopatra focuses on the penetration of the lavishly wealthy East by western armies, purportedly for its own good, and of exotic eastern women by those same

¹⁴² *The Ten Commandments* (1956) 1:58:00.

¹⁴³ *The Ten Commandments* (1923) 14:15.

western invaders. While this embodies the essence of orientalism in film, there are also positive aspects of American cinematic representations of Cleopatra, and especially Alexandria, the Ptolemaic capital of Egypt. But while there are variations in the manner of orientalism evident in the various major film versions of *Cleopatra*, the changing political relationship between the US and Egypt during the twentieth century does not appear to have influenced these films in any significant way.

The 1934 version of *Cleopatra* begins with the caption: “In the year 48 BC Julius Caesar, having conquered half the world, turned his ambitious eyes toward the splendor of Egypt, where Ptolemy and his sister, Cleopatra, struggled for the sole possession of the world’s richest throne.”¹⁴⁴ Egypt is thus depicted as lavishly wealthy, politically unstable and militarily obtainable. The newly-arrived Julius Caesar, whose stated purpose is “to see that there is peace in Egypt,”¹⁴⁵ is about to sign an agreement with Ptolemy when the blond, barely-clothed Claudette Colbert as Cleopatra rolls out of a carpet. Using a combination of her sexual allure and the idea that a political partnership with her would make possible the conquest of India, she quickly wins him over, and their first implied sexual encounter takes place just twenty minutes into the film. It is her seduction of Marc Antony later in the film, however, that remains the paradigm of cinematic depictions of oriental women and sexuality. He marches onto Cleopatra’s barge, intent on bending her to his will, and she soon disarms him with faux-candor and coy flattery. She laughingly admits she had intended to seduce him, saying, “I’m dressed to lure you, Antony.”¹⁴⁶ But

144 *Cleopatra* (1934) Paramount Pictures; Directed by Cecil B. DeMille, Written by Bartlett Cormack and Waldemar Young 3:00.

145 *Ibid* 7:30.

146 *Ibid* 48:12.

she also suggests that such crude tactics would never work on a man as strong as he, thereby allowing her to parade in front of him her harem-full of scantily-clad dancing girls while plying him with wine. Her servants pull clam nets from the sea, only to reveal dripping, barely-clothed slave girls with clam shells full of jewels, followed by more dancers dressed in skimpy leopard skins who wrestle as a brawny man whips them like a lion tamer. They continue to drink, and Cleopatra makes it clear that her body is as available to Antony as her wealth and land, an offer he is unable to pass up.



The fair Claudette Colbert as Cleopatra. Cleopatra rolling out of a carpet to meet Caesar.

The 1963 *Cleopatra*, starring Elizabeth Taylor, depicts an even more sexually-forward and alluring temptress. Taylor's Cleopatra deftly manipulates her would-be conquerors with her womanly wiles, but she is also extremely politically savvy and ambitious. While she is still lobbying for Julius Caesar to make her sole ruler of Egypt, she tells her servants "we must not disappoint the mighty Caesar. The Romans tell

fabulous tales of my bath and hand maidens ... and my morals.”¹⁴⁷ She arranges a decadent “bathing” scene for his arrival – with her nude body, barely covered by a cloth, at its center. She had previously spied on a conversation among the top Roman commanders in which they discussed, with admiration, her alleged intellectual ability and use of torture, poison and her “considerable” sexual talents to get what she wants. One reads a report that, regarding sex, “It is said that she chooses, in the manner of a man, rather than wait to be chosen after womanly fashion,” and that “her lovers [...] are listed more easily by number than by name.”¹⁴⁸

After subsequently winning Caesar over, she discusses with him his lack of an heir and his barren wife. She compares a woman who cannot bear children to a dry river, insisting that a woman must give life like the Nile, adding, “I am the Nile. I will bear many sons.”¹⁴⁹ She explains to Caesar that her hips and breasts are those of a woman well-built for child-bearing and promises to give him a son. Thus, Cleopatra equates her body with the Nile and offers both to Caesar. But this offer goes hand in hand with her own ambition. She scoffs at Rome’s republic and pushes Caesar to marry her and proclaim himself Emperor of Rome, so that they may then conquer the world in the manner of Alexander the Great, whose tomb they visit together.

Cleopatra’s ethnicity as depicted in these films is illustrative. In reality, her historic appearance is widely debated. The Ptolemys were Greek rulers of Egypt, descended from one of Alexander the Great’s generals, so it is perfectly plausible that she

¹⁴⁷ *Cleopatra* (1963) Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation; Directed by Joseph Mankiewicz, Written by Joseph Mankiewicz and Ranald MacDougall 30:45.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid 26:20.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid 59:30.

would have had light skin, but it is just as likely that she would have been darker, with more “eastern” features. Greeks were by no means monochromatically white, and the Ptolemaic bloodline was likely mixed with Egyptians as well. Filmmakers, of course, are unable to remain neutral on a topic of this topic because they must depict her in a particular way, but the question of Cleopatra’s ethnicity is at least alluded to in both the 1934 and 1963 *Cleopatra*. As rumors about Cleopatra and Julius Caesar spread among Roman socialites early in the 1934 version, a young woman asks, “Is she black?”¹⁵⁰ Everyone around her bursts into laughter, but that is as close as the film comes to making a case for her historic color being white, and in any event white actresses virtually always played eastern women in these early films. In the 1963 version, in a scene on Cleopatra’s barge, similar to the seduction scene in the earlier film, she compliments Antony on his dress, a leopard-skin outfit with a blue-green cloak, and mentions that it is Greek. Antony says that he likes “almost all Greek things,” to which Cleopatra responds, “as an almost all-Greek thing, I’m flattered.”¹⁵¹ This defines the Elizabeth Taylor Cleopatra much more clearly, making her fair skin and dark hair plausible, but an “almost all-Greek” woman could just as easily have had darker skin.

Later in the twentieth century, films depicting the Middle East began to represent ethnicity more realistically, a trend which affected representations of Cleopatra. A 1999 made-for-TV *Cleopatra*¹⁵² depicts her as much darker, with a Chilean-born actress (Leonor Varela) in the title role. The film did not reach a wide audience, and does not

¹⁵⁰ *Cleopatra* (1934) 22:00.

¹⁵¹ *Cleopatra* (1963) 2:09:00.

¹⁵² *Cleopatra* (1999) Hallmark Entertainment; Directed by Franc Roddam, Written by Margaret George and Stephen Harrigan.

warrant extensive discussion here, but the representation of Cleopatra's ethnicity is noteworthy. As compared to Claudet Colbert and Elizabeth Taylor, she is strikingly dark, although it is interesting that her facial features do appear more western than "oriental."



Elizabeth Taylor as Cleopatra in 1963.



The 1999 Cleopatra.

Another common aspect of these films worth noting is the frequent references to the famous lighthouse and library at Alexandria. Constructed by Ptolemy I, the library was one of the great intellectual institutions of the ancient world, and repeated references to it in these films underscore the academic achievements of the early Alexandrians. The great lighthouse on the island of Pharos, constructed by Ptolemy II and remembered as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, also remains one of the icons of Alexandria.¹⁵³

The Roman commanders marvel at the great lighthouse in the 1934 *Cleopatra*, and Cleopatra rants furiously in the 1963 version when Caesar burns enemy ships in the harbor and the fire spreads to the library: "Use that Roman genius for destruction; tear

¹⁵³ Justin Pollard and Howard Reid, *The Rise and Fall of Alexandria: Birthplace of the Modern World*. New York: Penguin Books, 2007. p. 89.

down pyramids, wipe out cities. How dare you and the rest of your barbarians set fire to my library?! Play conqueror all you want mighty Caesar; rape, murder, pillage, thousands, millions of human beings, but neither you nor any other barbarian has the right to destroy one human thought!”¹⁵⁴ Thus the Romans are the “barbarians” and the Egyptians, or at least the learned scholars of Alexandria, are the intellectuals. The lighthouse and library are both depicted in Oliver Stone’s *Alexander* (2004) as well, which begins and ends in Alexandria with an aging Ptolemy I reminiscing about Alexander the Great. The film as a whole is shaped by the contemporary perspective that military meddling in the East often has catastrophic consequences. Aristotle instructs the young Alexander that “the East has a way of swallowing men and their dreams.”¹⁵⁵ Egypt, however, because of its Greek rule, is separated from the “East,” as is shown by the two lasting emblems of Ptolemaic knowledge and architecture that are front and center in the brief portions of the film that take place there. Ptolemy muses about Alexander’s life and legacy while strolling around the library, stacked high with papyrus scrolls, and the lighthouse is visible in the background. This is anachronistic, of course, as the lighthouse was conceived and constructed by his son, Ptolemy II, but the importance of the symbol as a means of representing Alexandria remains.

154 *Cleopatra* (1963) 40:00.

155 *Alexander* (2004) Warner Brothers Pictures; Directed by Oliver Stone, Written by Oliver Stone and Christopher Kyle 15:30.

IV: *THE MUMMY*

The numerous cinematic versions of mummy tales draw on a rich nineteenth-century literary and theatrical tradition, which began with Jane C. Loudon's *The Mummy! A Tale of the Twenty-Second Century* in 1827. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is thought to have been one of her main sources of inspiration, as is a collection of mummies brought back from Egypt which she likely saw on display in London in 1821.¹⁵⁶ This popular novel inspired the play *The Mummy* (1833) by William Bayle Bernard, which in turn led to numerous additional versions of the story. European fascination with mummies dates to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when it came to be believed that their internal remains had broad medicinal uses. This spawned a market for recovering and selling mummies for transport back to Europe. Following the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt, Europeans developed an uncontrollable lust for all things Egyptian.¹⁵⁷ This craze went hand in hand with the bevy of mummy fictions in European literature and theatre. It should come as no surprise, then, that American cinematic portrayals of Egypt traffic heavily in mummies, western archeologists and grave robbers.

The first major film to draw on this rich theatrical and literary tradition was *The Mummy* in 1932, which follows two British archeological expeditions, the first of which uncovers an ancient scroll and a mummy. The opening captions inform the viewer that, "This is the Scroll of Thoth. Herein are set down the magic words by which Isis raised

¹⁵⁶ Lisa Hopkins, "Jane C. Loudon's *The Mummy!*: Mary Shelley Meets George Orwell, and They Go in a Balloon to Egypt" in *Cardiff Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text* 10 (June 2003).

¹⁵⁷ Max Rodenbeck, *Cairo: The City Victorious*. New York: Vintage Books, 2000. pp. 32-35.

Osiris from the dead.”¹⁵⁸ They learn that the mummy is Imhotep, a priest who appears to have been mummified alive, and one of them reads from the scroll, inadvertently bringing Imhotep back to life. Eleven years later the mummy, calling himself Ardath Bey, approaches the son of that archeologist on a subsequent expedition and helps him find the tomb of Anck-es-en-Amon, the princess he had been put to death for attempting to reincarnate. Imhotep tells him Egyptians are not permitted to dig up their own dead; only foreign museums are. This implies that they need Europeans to help them understand their own history, and also that British archeologists are justified in exhuming Egyptian tombs. After they complete their work and move everything they find to the Cairo Museum, a plaque informs visitors that, “All objects in the room are from her unplundered tomb, discovered by the British Museum Field Force 1932.”¹⁵⁹ This flatly states that the British “discovered” the tomb, whereas the suggestion is that if anyone else had removed anything from it it would have been “plundering.”

The film’s female lead, Helen, has visions of ancient Egypt and says she wants to be in “the real Egypt.” After a shot of the sprawling city, towered over by minarets, she laments, “Are we really in this dreadful modern Cairo?”¹⁶⁰ In fact, she is meant to be a reincarnation of the princess, and Imhotep attempts first to resurrect the mummy of the princess, then to mummify Helen, who has another vision of her past life and prays to – and is saved by – Isis. This goes far beyond a fantasy in which the East serves as a stage for adventure, because the self/other dichotomy is broken down here. Helen longs to be in

158 *The Mummy* (1932) Universal Pictures; Directed by Karl Freund, Written by Nina Wilcox Putnam and Richard Schayer 1:05.

159 *Ibid* 17:20.

160 *Ibid* 18:50.

ancient Egypt and turns out to be a reincarnation of an ancient Egyptian. Said's idea of orientalism does not involve white westerners longing to *be* eastern, but that is exactly what is happening here. Helen's realization that she is, in a manner of speaking, an Egyptian princess is a significant rise in position as compared to that which she previously occupied: the daughter of an important Englishman. Furthermore, this is not an isolated occurrence, as many of the films *The Mummy* influenced would revive the same theme.

The Mummy had a string of B-movie sequels and imitators: *The Mummy's Hand* (1940), *The Mummy's Tomb* (1942), *The Mummy's Ghost* (1944) and *The Mummy's Curse* (1944). The British *The Mummy* (1959) inspired its own British sub-genre, a string of mummy films unrelated to the original in plot: *The Curse of the Mummy's Tomb* (1964), *The Mummy's Shroud* (1966) and *Blood from the Mummy's Tomb* (1971). There is a certain amount of evidence in the British films of the historical period in which they were made, such as the Egyptians playing a more active role and questioning British motives – and challenging their right to plunder Egyptian tombs – reflecting the contemporary view of long-dominated but newly-antagonistic Egypt, particularly after the Suez Crisis of 1956. In the 1959 film an Egyptian protests when British archeologists seek to open an ancient tomb. He warns them in Arabic, repeating in English, “He who robs the grave of Egypt dies.”¹⁶¹ He swears to the Egyptian god Karnak to seek vengeance and later reads from a scroll to bring a mummy back to life. After taking the

¹⁶¹ *The Mummy* (1959) Hammer Film Productions (UK); Directed by Terence Fisher, Written by Jimmy Sangster 4:00.

mummy to England, he orders it to hunt down and kill the archeologists, but one of their wives, who resembles the princess the mummy once loved, is able to distract it.

This indication of the historical backdrop is not present in American versions of *The Mummy*, however, as they remain almost completely uninfluenced by historical context. The orientalism in these films seems completely disconnected from reality, and only increases as time goes on. While *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) is not a mummy film, it does fit most of the parameters of the sub-genre and has greatly influenced it. Indiana is an American archeologist who – working in conjunction with the American government – goes in search of an ancient artifact in Egypt. In competition with other treasure hunters, he battles the locals – mere pawns in the westerners’ grave-robbing games – and in the process saves the white damsel in distress. The main difference from earlier mummy films is that the supernatural force in the film is the Ark of the Covenant, an artifact of Judeo-Christian mythology, rather than a mummy brought back to life by forces from Egyptian mythology.¹⁶² *Raiders of the Lost Ark* thus keeps with the theme of supernatural power as the driving force behind the film’s focus, but replaces ancient Egyptian magic with Judeo-Christian mysticism.

The film is rampant with stock orientalist stereotypes. The comically ungainly squad of goons who chase Indiana and Marion around Cairo are easily foiled. Their faces and heads are covered, rendering them indistinguishable, except for a sinister, bearded

¹⁶² In fact, much of Loudon’s conceptualization of the mummy in her novel seems to have been in response to aspects of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* she disliked. For instance, the fact that Shelley’s monster is purely a creation of science, lacking divine influence, juxtaposes with Loudon’s mummy, who plays the role of a wise advisor to those who come to trust him, and he even states flatly that he owes his rebirth to divine benevolence. Lisa Hopkins, “Jane C. Loudon’s *The Mummy!*: Mary Shelley Meets George Orwell, and They Go in a Balloon to Egypt.”

figure adorned in black robes and a black turban, who wields a huge curved sword and a toothy smile. Indiana casually shoots him after watching him whirl his sword, embodying the essence of superior western arms in conflict with primitive eastern weapons. Presumed western superiority is also highlighted by Marion's insistence, while being carried away in a basket, that, "You can't do this to me – I'm an American!"¹⁶³ This is meant to be ironic, of course, as they obviously can do this to her, despite her being an American. But the underlying implication of American entitlement remains. When Indiana dons Arab robes and covers his face to attain anonymity and stumbles upon Marion, bound and gagged in a tent, at first she shrieks and coils, seeing the excited look in his eye and perceiving him as eastern and depraved. But when he pulls the robe away, she is elated to see his white face.

In addition to fitting the general framework of earlier mummy films, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* also lays the groundwork for several subsequent films, especially concerning the prominent use of snakes, spiders, scorpions and other such repellant vermin. The kind of mechanized booby traps found in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* also play an important role in subsequent mummy films, as does the comic relief provided by elaborate fight sequences.

The 1999 re-make of *The Mummy* is basically a blend of an Indiana Jones-like adventure with the plot of the original 1932 *The Mummy*. The film begins in ancient Egypt with the torture and live mummification of Imhotep for his affair with the pharaoh's mistress and then jumps to 1923, with Brendan Fraser as a French Foreign Legion officer leading his unit in a losing battle against Arab cavalry in the fictional

¹⁶³ *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) Paramount Pictures; Directed by Steven Spielberg, Written by Lawrence Kasdan and George Lucas 40:45.

ancient city of Hamunaptra, the City of the Dead. The film centers around his character and an aspiring Egyptologist, Evelyn, as they attempt to rediscover the city years later, and the mummy they inadvertently reincarnate and must then kill again. All manner of orientalist tropes appear in the film, most conspicuously the foul and credulous Arab characters. The Arab prison guard who allows Evelyn to buy Rick's freedom is greedy, yet easily out-bargained, and particularly fetid. The idea of sexually alluring and available eastern women is also present when Evelyn masquerades as eastern. Rick detests her at first and only reluctantly allows her to accompany him, until they are forced to stop and resupply after losing everything in a boating fiasco, when she purchases black oriental gowns, complete with a sheer, see-through veil. He freezes when he sees her – seated atop a camel, no less – and stares. This is the first time Rick sees Evelyn as a sex object rather than an annoying girl. Her masquerading in oriental garb, therefore, immediately identifies her as a sexual, and presumably obtainable, woman. From that moment on, they develop an entirely different relationship, and she becomes another object Rick hopes to attain in addition to the treasure, rather than an obstacle preventing him from finding it. In addition to this sexual orientalism, the campy fight scenes, lumbering Arabs and surplus of crawling and slithering pests, akin to those in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, merge to create a truly fantastical adventure exploding with orientalism.

Like the 1940 *The Mummy's Hand* and the British *The Mummy* in 1959, the 1999 version of *The Mummy* inspired a string of sequels. *The Mummy Returns* (2001) is every bit as orientalist as its 1999 predecessor. The film follows Rick and Evelyn as they face off with the re-resurrected Imhotep. Accompanied by their young son, the pair “discover”

a tomb at the film's beginning. Rick tells the boy to wait outside "while [his] mother goes and desecrates another tomb" (he mumbles this under his breath so his son cannot hear it).¹⁶⁴ He then smashes through a wall – on which Evelyn had been examining hieroglyphics – to reveal a chamber full of mummies, stacked on shelves, with scorpions and spiders covering the floor, across which he walks casually, crunching them as he goes. After they steal a bracelet, a variety of booby traps cause the place to fall apart around them, similar to the opening sequence in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Evelyn claims the bracelet will lead them to a mythical oasis and argues they should go in search of it. She says Ramses IV sent 1000 men to find it, "the last known expedition," but then adds that "Alexander the Great sent troops in search of it; so did Caesar and Napoleon."¹⁶⁵ Not only does this historical name-dropping surround an absolutely fabricated story, but it states that Ramses IV's expedition was the last (he ruled around 1150 BCE), *after* Caesar, Alexander and Napoleon. Chronology and actual history are thus completely disregarded, and it is also not surprising that three of the fabricated expeditions were carried out by westerners.

Their journey involves riding in a blimp provided by Rick's friend from "Magic Carpet Airways"¹⁶⁶ and wandering through the jungle-like "oasis," in which skeletons of Roman legionnaires and Napoleon's troops are strung up on wooden frames. Grotesque, savage little men hunt and kill as many of them as they can, and when Evelyn's brother asks, "Who were those creepy little pigmy things?" Rick responds, "They're just the local

¹⁶⁴ *The Mummy Returns* (2001) Universal Pictures; Directed by Stephen Sommers, Written by Stephen Sommers 5:00.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid* 23:00.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid* 55:00.

natives.”¹⁶⁷ Along the way, Evelyn has recurring glimpses of her previous life in ancient Egypt, eventually realizing the pharaoh Anch Su Namun betrayed with Imhotep was her father. She has a vision of herself and Anch Su Namun, wearing skimpy, two-piece outfits and gold masks and having a knife fight for the amusement of the pharaoh’s court, and Evelyn – whose earlier incarnation was Nefretiri – comes out on the losing end. (At the end of the film they fight again, this time in western clothing, and Evelyn wins.) Again, she masquerades as eastern and becomes a sex object.¹⁶⁸

CONCLUSION

The orientalism evident in American films about Egypt is thus significantly more complicated than Said’s conception of orientalism would suggest. Not only are specific aspects of it quite positive, such as the veneration of the library and lighthouse at Alexandria and the admiration shown for the intelligent and powerful Cleopatra, but in several cases the Orient is represented as a desirable location. Helen longs to be in ancient Egypt in the 1932 *The Mummy*, and it turns out she is reincarnated Egyptian royalty. Part of this is connected to the stereotype of eastern wealth and decadence, but this is still a two-way street.

On the other hand, the orientalism in these films seems immune to historical context, suggesting that Said is correct in cases where powerful forces have not forced

¹⁶⁷ Ibid 1:32:30.

¹⁶⁸ The film led to another sequel, a spin-off called *The Scorpion King* (2002), which is based on one of the villains invented for *The Mummy Returns*. Another sequel followed in 2008, the poorly conceived *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor*, which follows Rick and Evelyn to China to do battle with a resurrected Chinese emperor. The orientalism in these films grows more and more extreme and moves even further away from plausibility.

the West to ponder dominant views of the East. After all, it took a catastrophic war in Iraq to begin to break down the dichotomization of eastern and western in American cinematic representations of Baghdad. The American cinematic view of Jerusalem is far more complicated and varied, and individual filmmakers have different personal connections to Christian mythology and contemporary regional politics, which disturbs a linear evolution of filmic depictions. What this explication of American films set in Egypt shows above all else, however, is that lacking this kind of political/military impact or personal connection, orientalism persists and even expands in American artistic illustrations of the Middle East.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

My intent has been to approach orientalism from an historical perspective and provide an explication of its evolution in one specific medium with regards to particular geographic locations. By linking this progression to the specific literary, political and military history that informs it, I have illustrated that orientalism evolves according to its historical context. The historical/political milieu in which a film is made, in other words, leads to significant changes in the way orientalism manifests itself, and powerful forces, such as 9/11 and the Second Gulf War, can even lead to filmmakers tearing down aspects of the orientalist paradigm. On the other hand, when left untouched by such forces, orientalism persists in a static, unchanging way.

A brief examination of two additional films dealing with the “oriental other” will shed some additional light on these changing representations. Over the course of the twentieth century, a number of big-budget epics have been made about the Crusades. Much can be discerned about the period in which those films were made by examining the specific phases they purport to represent, and the ways in which they portray the Christian and Muslim characters, armies and claims to the land. Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Crusades* (1935) chronicles the Third Crusade, sometimes referred to as the King’s Crusade, lead mostly by Phillip II of France, Richard I of England and Frederick I, the Holy Roman Emperor. This crusade was a reaction to Saladin’s reconquest of Jerusalem in 1187. *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), on the other hand, loosely follows the events

leading up to Saladin's retaking of Jerusalem, thereby underlining the historical follies of western invasions in the Middle East.

The Third Crusade is the best choice for a filmmaker who wishes to show heroic European Christians setting out to save white damsels in distress from savage, blaspheming orientals. Although it ultimately failed, DeMille makes use of Saladin's agreement to allow unarmed Christian pilgrims to enter the city – which they had been able to do before 1099¹⁶⁹ – to suggest a form of Christian triumph at the end of the film. The opening caption of *The Crusades*, set against a shot of a minaret with a muezzin calling to prayer, reads: "The Saracens¹⁷⁰ of Asia swept over Jerusalem and the Holy Land, crushing the Christians to death or slavery."¹⁷¹ This sets the stage for a Christian re-conquest of the "Holy Land," which has been unjustly stolen by Muslim "Asians" with no claim to it. In the following scenes a cross is pulled off of a building and broken into pieces, then burned along with what appear to be bibles and paintings of Christian figures. An oriental auctioneer is selling chained white women – most of them blond – to a number of eastern-looking men, saying, "And may Allah give you joy."¹⁷² Again, "Allah" is used in an otherwise English sentence to distinguish the Muslim belief in God as explicitly separate from that of Christians. This will be addressed directly at the end of

¹⁶⁹ In fact, as Saladin recognized, a large part of the potential revenues from Jerusalem was related to traveling Christian pilgrims.

¹⁷⁰ The Romans referred to non-Arab inhabitants of the Province of Syria as Saracens, and it was later applied to Arabs as well. During the Crusades the term became synonymous with Muslim. The term itself is an example of western oriental reductionism, using one word or idea to represent a large, diverse geography of disparate peoples and cultures.

¹⁷¹ *The Crusades* (1935) Paramount Pictures; Directed by Cecil B. DeMille and Written by Harold Lamb and Waldemar Young 2:20.

¹⁷² *Ibid* 4:03.

the film. These Caucasian captives are guarded by a black man¹⁷³ holding a spear and wearing a leopard skin around his waist. As threatening Saladin rides through the streets triumphantly, an old Christian man declares to him: “I go to all the kings in Christendom. A mighty host shall arise and arm!” Saladin responds:

Who sets foot in Asia with a sword shall not return. Go, Hermit. Carry your thunder across the sea. Tell your Christian kings what you have seen. Your women sold as slaves, your knights trampled under our horses, your gospels cast into the flames, the power of your cross broken forever.

The old man says in return that, “The armies of Christ shall arise and redeem his tomb. The cries of these Christian women sold into slavery shall be answered.”¹⁷⁴ This seems like a direct challenge from Saladin to all Christians to combat, if they dare, his desecration of their religion and “pillaging” of their women. In western minds, what better justification could there be for marching off to fight for Jerusalem? While there are no oriental women in the film, the theme of dark, eastern, Muslim male’s lust for white, western, Christian women goes beyond the capture and sale of white female slaves. Saladin is captivated by Richard’s wife, Berengaria, and after he captures her and discovers a plot to assassinate Richard, she agrees to give herself to him if he will save Richard. (Her release from this arrangement is part of the happy ending.)

The fighting is concentrated around the port city of Acre, which the Crusaders did take, thereafter slaughtering all of its Muslim inhabitants. In one of the film’s most revealing scenes, Berengaria tells the captive King Richard, who has been brought before

¹⁷³ Black slaves are the norm in these earlier films, perhaps representing a school of thought among some Americans that slavery in the Americas was to some extent forgivable because “eastern” peoples had enslaved each other for centuries, in which case the uniform blackness of such slaves reflects a specifically American perspective.

¹⁷⁴ *The Crusades* (1935) 5:40.

Saladin: “We were proud, dearest, when we took the cross,¹⁷⁵ and in our pride we fought to conquer Jerusalem. We tried to ride through blood to the Holy Place of God. And now . . . now we suffer.” Saladin corrects her, “The Holy City of *Allah*,” to which she responds, “What if we call him Allah or God? His cross is burned deep into our hearts. [...] Don’t you see Richard, there’s only one way: peace. Make peace between Christian and Saracen.”¹⁷⁶ In some ways, this sounds like a clip from a post-9/11-and-Iraq-invasion Hollywood film lobbying for peace and nonintervention, but another way to view this scene is that this was the only way for DeMille to end the film on a triumphant note for the crusaders. As Berengaria pleads with Richard to opt for peace, the implication is that he wants to push on and attack Jerusalem; thus the crusaders took the high road and chose to make peace with the violent “Asians.” The overly dramatized final scenes in which they file into the city (unarmed) to view sacred Christian sites before retreating, set to exuberant choral music, overshadows the simple fact that the Christians failed and are not returning home by choice. This goes unnoticed as crosses are raised anew over churches and Christian captives stream out of dungeons shouting “Freedom!” and “The war is over!”¹⁷⁷

While DeMille’s *The Crusades* focused on the only crusade that, when appropriately distorted, made the Christians seem justified, not particularly bloodthirsty, and at least partly victorious, the agenda of *Kingdom of Heaven* is entirely different. It opens with the captions: “It is almost 100 years since Christian armies from Europe

¹⁷⁵ The actual cross on which Christ was supposed to have been crucified was kept in Acre in the film. There is a rather cheesy scene in which the crusades clamber up a stone staircase to witness it, blinded by the bright light it apparently emits.

¹⁷⁶ *The Crusades* (1935) 152:00.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid* 159:00.

seized Jerusalem;” and “Europe suffers in the grip of repression and poverty. Peasant and lord alike flee to the Holy Land in search of fortune or salvation.”¹⁷⁸ The film’s initial scenes, set in France in 1184, paint a bleak picture of an impoverished, violent land with a cruel and unjust clergy. The western idea of the amalgamated East is evident, as Balian, the film’s protagonist, is told, “Jerusalem is easy to find. You come to where the men speak Italian, then continue until they speak something else.”¹⁷⁹ However, there is also a general incrimination of the West – and Christianity in particular – as having been guilty of the same manner of irrational extremism it now finds so troubling. As Balian makes his way toward Jerusalem, he hears a Christian preaching by the road, “To kill an infidel is not murder. It is the path to heaven.”¹⁸⁰ After arriving in Jerusalem, one of his compatriots tells him he has “seen the lunacy of fanatics of every denomination be called the will of God. Holiness is in right action and courage on behalf of those who cannot defend themselves.”¹⁸¹ Anachronistically imposed, this sense of egalitarianism reveals quite a bit about the film’s general attitude toward religion – more specifically Christianity, as Islam is left largely untouched. In fact, Muslims are generally portrayed positively in the film. The King of Jerusalem is said to have had a peace with Saladin for six years, under which he maintains Jerusalem as “a place for prayer for all faiths, as the Muslims did.”¹⁸² Furthermore, Saladin is represented as a rational leader who thinks preparation and skill win battles, not simply prayer to God. His army is organized and

178 *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation; Directed by Ridley Scott and Written by William Monahan 0:55.

179 Ibid 8:11.

180 Ibid 19:00.

181 Ibid 39:50.

182 Ibid 41:00.

disciplined, and easily defeats the Christian army when the new King of Jerusalem deliberately stirs up a war with him. When he besieges Jerusalem and defeats its inhabitants, then offers to let everyone leave the city safely, a bewildered Balian responds, “The Christians butchered every Muslim within the walls when they took this city.” He almost smiles, “I am not those men. I am Saladin.”¹⁸³ After they leave and he moves into the city, Saladin is seen picking up a cross in a disheveled church and carefully placing it on a table, illustrating that he respects Christian beliefs.

Christians, on the other hand, are represented quite negatively. Most of them are only interested in obtaining wealth and power and they start a war with Saladin for that reason. They capture Saladin’s sister, who is dressed in a black chador and veil. One of her captors tears off her veil, revealing a solemn, dark face, and she says simply, “صلاح الدين أخي”¹⁸⁴ (Salah alDin Akhee: Saladin is my brother), thinking this will save her. But he knows this already, and it is for this very reason that he rapes and kills her. Thus in *Kingdom of Heaven* it is Christians who defile innocent Muslim women.

Interestingly, the Princess of Jerusalem (the original King’s sister) is used to employ a new take on a familiar dynamic regarding eroticized oriental women. She is white, which makes sense historically,¹⁸⁵ but she wears titillating oriental gowns that fit her form closely – and reveal quite a bit of cleavage – and see-through veils. She also goes out of her way to pay Balian a visit and is quite forward about her intentions to sleep with him. Thus the white female masquerading as an oriental in order to play an erotic

183 Ibid 206:25.

184 Ibid 127:00.

185 She would have been of Frankish descent.

and sexually inviting role becomes a sexually free white woman who dons oriental garb to add to her allure, but in juxtaposition to the chaste, modest Muslim woman seen in the film.

In addition to the film's overall condemnation of western intervention in the Middle East – customary in Hollywood films since the beginning of the Iraq War – it to weighs in on the issue of Israel/Palestine as well. As the embattled occupants of Jerusalem prepare for what will likely be a successful assault by Saladin's forces, Balian addresses them: "We fight over an offense we did not give, against those who were not alive to be offended." He insists that "No one has claim ... *all* have claim,"¹⁸⁶ ignoring a priest's comment that this is blasphemy. This does not suggest a solution to the conflict, of course, but it does represent a pro-Palestinian stance, as the underlying suggestion is that they have a legitimate claim to the land as well. Here again, the impact of the Iraq War on American thinking about the region is evident, but this is in a film set in historic Jerusalem, not present-day Iraq. Thus, the force of actual occurrences in the region, at least when powerful enough, affects a rethinking of the traditional mode of representation.

I began this study of orientalism in American film with the intent of providing an historical and geographical context for orientalist representation in order to examine the validity of Said's thesis. Furthermore, this thesis bridges the gap between historical inquiry and post-colonial theory. Combining an analysis of the relevant history with a

186 Ibid 141:00.

consideration of shifts in orientalist iconography reveals conspicuous and distinct patterns in orientalism in American film. In short, the early Baghdad films seem to support Said's conception of pervasive orientalism, but the stark shifts in later American films set in Baghdad undermine this claim. *Real* occurrences in the *real* Middle East, it seems, have the ability to sway artistic representations of the "imagined" East Said proclaims. Significant shifts in filmic representations of Jerusalem are also the result of the American entanglement in Iraq, as seen in *Kingdom of Heaven*. But in addition, religious belief – or the lack thereof – is also important here because of the close connection many Americans feel to Jerusalem and its history – or at least one particular, mythological occurrence in its history. This is displayed in the very personal visions of filmmakers like Martin Scorsese and Mel Gibson.

Taken by itself, Egypt could be seen as an affirmation of Said's argument. Regardless of the historic milieu, American cinematic representations have remained frozen in static orientalist conceptions of Egyptians and Egyptian history. Not even the blunt force of 9/11 and the Iraq War has affected any shift in cinematic depictions of Egypt, which remain fantastical and mummy-laden. Although it is clear from these three examples that orientalism is considerably more complex than Said suggested, it certainly remains deeply-rooted in the way Americans view specific places in the Middle East.

This thesis suggests that Said is correct in arguing that the historic western idea of the Orient is largely imagined; in many of the films examined here, orientalist stereotypes dominate American cinematic representations of the region. Although, filmmakers and American audiences are now producing and paying to see more thoughtful films that

attempt to break through these images, examples such as *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Body of Lies* fail to do so and remain trapped in the mindset of dichotomy. They seek to comprehend – and also judge – Western intervention in the Middle East, but they continue to operate inside the parameters of West/East, us-versus-them, and their perspectives are as much influenced by internal American politics as by a desire to portray the Middle East accurately. Furthermore, this shift in American thinking and filmmaking was only brought about by the forceful impact of 9/11 and the Iraq War. What will it take, then, to move beyond orientalism? Said sought to expose as counterfeit and corrupt the very concept that such places as the Orient and Occident exist. Only by thinking of places such as Baghdad, Jerusalem and Egypt as unique, rather than populated by the same dark men, dancing women and magic; and as having separate and relative connections with the US, rather than representing different fronts in the East/West hegemonic dichotomy, will outmoded orientalist tropes cease to be the norm in American portrayals of those locations that exist within the arbitrary boundaries of our imagined Orient.

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